













AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS OF LOS ANGELES

John Riddle

Interviewed by Karen Anne Mason

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
University of California  
Los Angeles

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

### PERSONAL HISTORY:

**Born:** March 18, 1933, Los Angeles.

**Education:** A.A., earth science, Los Angeles City College; B.A., education and art, California State University, Los Angeles; M.A., California State University, Los Angeles.

**Military Service:** United States Air Force, 1953-57.

**Spouse:** Carmen Garrott Riddle, married April 24, 1953, six children.

### ART COMMISSIONS AND ACTIVITIES:

Sculpture commission, Expelled Because of Color, Georgia State Capitol grounds, 1976.

Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority commission, Tenth Street Midtown Station, four walls sculpture, 1984.

Georgia Council for the Arts commission, ten color lithographs created for the Governor's Art Award Program, 1985.

Artwork used on the set of the television series In the Heat of the Night, (MGM-UA), 1988.

Painting commission, Hartsfield Airport, Georgia, Olympics hundredth anniversary, 1996.

Sculpture commission, Seagram's Company, Spirits at the Gate, 1999.

Consultant, California African American Museum.

### AWARDS

Two Emmy Awards, for Renaissance in Black: Two Artists' Lives, 1971.



Governor's Award, Visual Artist, State of Georgia,  
1981.

Fulton County, Georgia, Visual Artist of the Year  
Award, 1987.



## INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

Karen Anne Mason, B.A., English, Simmons College; M.A., Art History, UCLA.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Riddle's home, Atlanta, Georgia.

**Dates, length of sessions:** September 5, 1992 (219 minutes); June 26, 1993 (130).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 5.8 hours.

**Persons present during interview:** Riddle, Mason, Riddle's wife, Carmen Riddle, intermittently.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series on African American art and artists in Los Angeles. This oral history project gathers and preserves interviews with African American artists who have created significant works and others in the Los Angeles metropolitan area who have worked to expand exhibition opportunities and public support for African American visual culture.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Riddle's childhood in Los Angeles, California and continuing through his activities as an artist in the Los Angeles area. Major topics discussed include Riddle's individual works of art, African American artists in Los Angeles, the effects of racism, and Riddle's philosophy of art.

### EDITING:

Steven J. Novak, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Riddle did not review the transcript but provided selected names when queried. As a consequence, family



names and some acquaintances remain unverified.

William Van Benschoten, editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history. Ji Young Kwon, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.





TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 5, 1992

MASON: Hello.

So the first question we always ask is, when and where were you born?

RIDDLE: In Los Angeles, California, March 18, 1933.

MASON: And who are your parents?

RIDDLE: John Thomas Riddle, Sr., and Helen Louise Wheeler.

MASON: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

RIDDLE: Yeah. I have an older sister, Joanne Tyler Jefferson, Judy Keeling, and a brother, Paul Anthony Riddle.

MASON: Okay. Do you know much about your grandparents and your family background?

RIDDLE: Yes.

MASON: Could you talk a bit about that?

RIDDLE: Well, let's see. On my mother's side, they lived in Bakersfield, California. That's my earliest recollection. Although my mother was born in Indiana, in Bloomington, we used to spend every summer in Bakersfield. That's a town about 115 miles north of Los Angeles, up Highway 99--used to be 99 in those days. It was always a pleasurable trip, and we would stay for the whole summer.



When I was young, I didn't realize my mother and father were actually getting a summer's vacation from us; we thought we were getting away from them. But I think, now that I have kids, they got the better deal. [laughter]

We always went up there usually for Thanksgiving. And my grandmother, Emma, she could cook. I mean, like everybody says grandmothers could cook. But she actually catered for restaurants and hotels right out of her kitchen. And it was always interesting. I don't want to associate it with food and swimming and just eating grapes and having a good time, but--

I had an Uncle George who was divorced and he had been in World War II and he had turned into an alcoholic. But he was like the classic "black wino" philosopher. I mean, he would sit and drink wine in the backyard and talk until he fell asleep. I slept out under the grape arbor with him in the summer, and I'd always listen to him. He had a lot of wisdom, but he had no respect. And he had a lot of frustration and--

MASON: You mean no respect for himself or other people?

RIDDLE: Well, I mean, the fact that he was an alcoholic, he probably didn't have the greatest respect for himself, because that's a form of suicide. But he didn't get respect from the other people in his family because they were embarrassed by the fact that there was an alcoholic



in the family. He was kind of like a laughingstock. But because I was always out there with him at night, and he would tell me different things-- I mean, he had a lot of wisdom. But it's kind of like the street preachers. You hear them out there, and everybody's walking along about their own business. Nobody really pays much attention to what they're saying. And yet some of them could be geniuses if we stopped and listened.

MASON: It seems like every black family has one. And it's usually the case where they were really ambitious but, because of their race or because of something like that, their dreams were kind of thwarted and so they end up being really self-destructive.

RIDDLE: Yeah, that's true. I remember my grandfather [inaudible] Drisdorn-- I don't know how many times my grandmother had been married, because my mother was a Wheeler and so was-- My Uncle George was a Wheeler. But my Aunt Suzy, who lives in Los Angeles--she's Suzy Johnson now--she was a Pinkney, and her brother Oliver, who is deceased, he was a Pinkney. And Mr. Drisdorn, who was my grandfather that I remember-- So at least there's three names there. So she must have been married at least three times.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But he worked at the railroad. And he had like a



drawerful of those pocket watches where the lids pop open. He had a whole drawerful, and I always used to just be amazed to look in that drawer and see twenty or thirty of those really nice watches. I don't know if they all worked or not, but that's one of my memories. Just like I had a memory of how she had this chicken coop, my grandmother, and she raised chicks, and she cut off the chickens' heads when it was time to eat them and wrung their necks, and they would flop around in the yard. And we'd all look like, "Wow!" Chickens without heads trying to get that last flight. You know. So I remember those kinds of things. It was always hot, dry.

Then when I got older, I used to go up there and spend the summer. But she used to say, "Well, you're too old to sit around. You have to go to work." And we'd go work in the fields. The worst job imaginable. And I used to wonder then how did black people work in the fields for nothing, because I was making like five dollars a week and that was nothing. It was hot and long hours and picking onions and being-- Picking onions in 110 degrees and crying because you had to cut the tops off of them. And having so much onion juice and dirt on your hands, you couldn't wipe your eyes. You'd just be out there, "Boo hoo." And then people would take those onions home at night. I didn't want to see an onion! I think the last





time I spent the summer there, I was eighteen going on-- maybe, nineteen. And I came back to L.A. and went to school that fall and met Carmen Garrott, who I married and am still married to. We've been married thirty-nine years, now. But that's another part of the story.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Now, on my father's side, they had twelve kids. He's right in the middle. He was about number six. But I think the most interesting thing is, his father was a preacher, tall, about six foot five. I remember he had white hair and he stood as straight as a stick and he was real thin. And his name was C. Morton Riddle. And his wife--what's her name? I can't think of my grandmother's first name; she was just Grandmother Riddle. I know her name but I can't think of it. They had a little bit of everything in their family. They had a communist, I mean, which is really weird. One of my father's brothers was a communist; one was a very successful numbers racketeer and bookmaker. My father-- That was Edgar [Riddle]. Edgar and my father looked just alike. I mean, they looked like Indians. They had very straight hair and high cheekbones and a dark complexion like they were Native American Indians, not people from India. I always remember Edgar was always clean, and he always had on bad suits and tough shoes. But he was a very successful bookmaker and numbers



person in Pasadena.

My father grew up with the Robinson family. They were like Jackie's older brothers and all of that. They all knew each other. And one of my father's brothers, Ralph [Riddle], was the first black policeman in Pasadena. Let's see: Dwight [Riddle] was the communist. Two of them, two of the daughters, never left home. They stayed with their mother until she died. I think one of them is still alive. Geraldine [Riddle] is still alive, and I think Flo [Riddle] just passed recently. I might be even getting their names mixed up, but they lived in Pasadena on Walnut Street. And we'd go over there a lot, too, because it was a lot closer. It was on the original freeway in L.A., the Arroyo Seco. That was the freeway into Pasadena. That was the original. That was the only freeway in L.A. at one time when I was a kid. We used to go out there quite a bit. My grandfathers died in their sixties. My father's mother lived to be ninety-three, and my mother's mother lived to be about eighty-four. So they lived a long time. But I think the most interesting thing was that C. Morton Riddle, my grandfather, was directly related by blood to Carter G. Woodson. And one of the things that was really funny for me was-- I can't think quite now of the name of Carter G. Woodson's book, his quarterly publication. It might have been the Negro



Monthly Digest or something like that. The Negro Quarterly Digest [Journal of Negro History].

MASON: Yeah, I know what you're talking about.

RIDDLE: It's in the library downtown. There's a gentleman who died and bequeathed this huge collection. He tried to collect every black subject book and every book by a black author and every slave narrative out. So it's called the Williams Collection. It's on the fifth floor of the downtown library.

MASON: So he was going to be the southern Arthur Schomburg--?

RIDDLE: Yeah. In fact, they're rebuilding. We passed the building on my way bringing you here which is going to be the Fulton County research library. That's going to house his collection. They're going to move it out of there because too many people steal the books out of reference, which is a disservice to everybody who is interested to hoard-- But, then, the library is not good, because I read-- Now, this is a divergence right here. It's about the library and Carter G. Woodson. But I read Walter White's The Rope and the Faggot, which was the history of lynchings in the United States. At one time he was the head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], Walter White. He's a white-looking man, also.



MASON: Yeah, blond, blue-eyed.

RIDDLE: Yeah. And so he was able to cross back and forth across the color line and get information, like the Spook Who Sat by the Door [Sam Greenlee]. I checked the book out because I wanted to read it, and it was a signed copy in circulation by Walter White. So I got to read it. I took it back to the library, and they said, "How did that ever get out?" Here it was an autographed copy by the author, you know? The library is not supposed to be circulating those. But anyway, they aren't that tight with control. So it might be better for the Williams Collection to be housed in a place that has better security.

I found out that on my father's side I was able to trace their history, that they came from Virginia, from West Virginia. From Virginia, first. It was around the time of Alex Haley and Roots, and everybody was looking for their genealogy. And I started going, looking up-- I could always look up my family, because all I had to do was look up Carter G. Woodson's name in Carter G. Woodson's books. I mean, I'd look up C. Morton Riddle, and maybe once or twice a year he'd write an article about his family. And then by finding my grandfather, I could get these other names, and I could go back through other volumes and look them up in the table of contents. When I





had time, I could always go in there and read something about my family tree on that side.

The most interesting thing was that his mother was one of my father's great, or great-great, aunts on that side of the family. So there was this direct relationship between my father and Carter G. Woodson and my grandfather. So what I found out was-- Like, I started reading this, getting back further and further. And I read how in one episode where a friend of my grandfather smuggled them across the Saint Charles River and into West Virginia-- And he founded a church there because he was a minister. Then he left there and he went to Ohio, where my father was born, in Columbus. And then he got a pass to ship out in Los Angeles, which was Pasadena.

My father went to-- He was a very good athlete. He told me this when he was dying. I think it was in '81 when he passed. He had cancer or the thought of cancer-- I never knew whether he really had it or he believed he had it, because, you know-- But anyway, I went out to see him about three weeks before he passed rather than go to a funeral-- So I would sit out there every day, and he would tell me stuff. He told me that because of his Indian looks they had offered him a job to play baseball with the Portland Beavers. That was the Pacific Coast



League baseball team at the time. But he had to say he was Indian and he told them he didn't want to do that. Instead, he went to the Negro baseball league, and he played with the Negro baseball league. He went to Japan two times. It was a touring black baseball team. He used to have pictures in his drawer of him and these players and stuff. My mother used to say he could really play baseball, but he also was-- Between, I guess, 1924, '25, somewhere in there, and '27, he was on USC [University of Southern California]'s football team. He was the fullback on their football team.

MASON: He went on an athletic scholarship?

RIDDLE: No. I don't know, because he graduated with a degree in architecture. So I don't know if they were giving up athletic scholarships then like they do now.

MASON: Yeah, I was just wondering if he might be able to play sports--

RIDDLE: I mean, it's big money now, so that's why they do it now.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Because if you get to play in one of these bowl games, it's worth one million dollar revenue to your school whether you win or lose. So they're talking about big dough for the athletic program. So now they need blacks to be competitive, which is a whole other issue.



That's more closely related to my art and my times.

MASON: No, I was just wondering if he went there to play football or if he went there to get an architecture degree. If there was even that distinction.

RIDDLE: Well, I think, probably in those days the distinctions were blurred.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Because I think most people who went to college in those days got a degree. Probably, if I had to bet on it, there's probably a higher percentage of degreed athletes then than there is now. In fact, I think the demands, probably--practice and all that--were probably less then than they are now. I talked to a guy who went to UCLA, a Rhodes Scholar named Hal Griffin. He was there back in the early sixties. He said that it was 60 hours a week for football during football season, and 60 hours a week of academics to be a Rhodes Scholar. When you add it all up, it's 7 times 24, and you've taken 120 off of that. I mean, that's not much time to sleep there or eat or do anything else, because it comes out pretty close to the same amount of time. It's probably about 160 hours. So you've got 40 hours a week to sleep, over a seven day period to sleep and go do everything. So I mean it's like it took up all their time, essentially.

MASON: You said your father studied architecture?



RIDDLE: Uh-huh. You know, my mother went to USC also.

That's where they met. She was a lawyer. She was the first black women in the history of UCLA law school to get a degree. She got her degree in 1927.

MASON: I'm sorry, she went to--?

RIDDLE: She went to 'SC also.

MASON: As an undergraduate?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

MASON: And then she went to UCLA law school?

RIDDLE: No, she went to 'SC law school.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: She graduated from 'SC--I meant to say 'SC--with the highest-- She's the first black woman to ever graduate from 'SC's law school.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: And another thing that they did-- I mean nobody knows this, but when my father died, they did a lot of research on him. My brothers and sisters sent me some articles that I left at work. I wish I had brought them with me. But she wrote the words to USC's fight song, but they don't get any credit for it. She don't get no royalties. But that "Fight on for Old 'SC"-- In this article they wrote about my mother and my father, and they said Helen Wheeler wrote the words to USC's fight song. We didn't even know that. And my sister was talking





about, "Well, shoot. We ought to be able to sue for some royalties." [laughter] You know.

But anyway, they were at 'SC together. One last distinction about my father was he had the record, athletic record, for the most touchdowns ever scored by a USC player from the time he played until Anthony [T.] Davis scored five touchdowns against Notre Dame in '65. He was there that day, my father, because he went to every 'SC game, and they honored him over the mike that Davis had broken his record. He got to stand up, and all his old 'SC buddies-- Because I used to go to some of those games. And I mean all these old guys are sitting there, "Hey, Fred!" "Hi, Bill!" [laughter] So it was kind of funny.

And then generations are so bad. I think Ronald Reagan was governor of California. We went to the Rose Bowl to see 'SC, and Reagan walked out and people booed. And my oldest son, Tony [Anthony Thomas Riddle], he went. It was me, my father, and my oldest son, Tony. We went to the Rose Bowl and we were all in there and Tony starts booing. And my father was like-- He was with all his cronies, and he was like, "Shut up! Goddammit, Johnny! Can't you make him--? That's disgraceful!" It was like the generation gap. So then they stood up for the national anthem, right? So my son didn't stand up. Boy, that just knocked my father out. "Goddammit, Johnny! Make him stand



up! All my friends are here!" He's talking out the corner of his mouth. "Can't you make him stand up? Jesus Christ!" Tony was just sitting there. Since then, I mean, me and Tony have laughed about that, and Tony kind of feels bad because he shouldn't have dumped his protest over on his grandfather. You know, but--

MASON: Because he had served in the war.

RIDDLE: Yeah, and Tony had a-- It was in the year of the big naturals, Angela [Y.] Davis and all that. "Power to the people."

MASON: So it wasn't necessarily--?

RIDDLE: My father didn't really-- See, he would have joined the army in the First World War, but he was too young. And I don't remember now if he didn't get to go in, or he didn't go overseas. But he was either on the-- A little more than Bill [William J.] Clinton. You know, but he's either on the periphery of the army or in, but I don't recall that now. I just remember that he's very patriotic and that he worked at Douglas Aircraft [Company] during the Second World War as a structural architect on Douglas's war planes and--

MASON: Yeah. Because I was going to ask you if he ever got a chance to work as an architect.

RIDDLE: Oh, yeah. Before the war he worked with Paul Williams. He was with Paul Williams, who is a noted Los



Angeles architect. He was with Paul Williams's firm, and then during the war, he went to work at Douglas. And then, after the war, he went back with Paul for a while as a specifications writer.

MASON: I'm not sure what that is.

RIDDLE: That's a person who writes what-- The specs are all the detailed things of what are the specifications. If you're going to put these windows in this house, what size, what kind of hardware, what kind of windows. The specifics. What kind of nails. Because that's all laid out somewhere in the architectural plan for a structure. What kind of doorknobs. So if it's with plumbing, if you write plumbing specs, what kind of pipe, what size, where the bends occur, what kind of hardware you would use there. So that's, technically, the specifications. What kind of toilets. That's if you're plumbing. What kind of faucets. Anything related to plumbing, if you're writing plumbing specs.

So the rest of his life-- He always worked as an architect or a spec writer. So at the end of his life, he worked for a guy who used to work for him named Kerry Jenkins. Kerry Jenkins formed a successful architectural firm in Beverly Hills out on Wilshire Boulevard, and my father worked for him until he died.

MASON: Can you think of any specific projects that your



father had been involved with?

RIDDLE: Well, one of the things that he used to always take pride in was up along those streets like Rossmore [Avenue], some of those real nice streets that you can take as corridors to Hollywood. Like above Olympic [Boulevard], and you go up Rossmore. I used to know all of those streets. There's a lot of English Tudor homes and a lot of really nice homes there. Well, in that year, Paul built a lot of those homes. I mean, it was his design and stuff. My father used to go by and say, "We did that house." And then we'd go a little further and he'd say, "We did this one." And we'd go down another street and he'd say, "I remember doing this one." Between Vine Street and Wilshire, I'd say, they did a lot of houses in there that are still there. Some of the Spanish houses. They both basically did residential architecture. At one time, I guess, Paul was probably the most advanced black architect, maybe [not] in the world, but definitely in the United States, at one time back in those days, in the thirties, up until the war. And the weirdest thing is, my wife's family and my father's and my mother and them, they all knew the same people, Paul Williams and Della Williams and all the different people. It's really weird.

In fact, it's so weird that when I was born--





There's a lady named Alice Garrott who was Carmen's grandmother. I was born two years before Carmen, but my mother and father moved into Alice Garrott's apartment. So the first two years I was born, I lived in that apartment of Carmen's, my wife's, grandmother. But I didn't meet her until I was fourteen. We have this picture at Ferndale, that park up there. It's part of Griffith Park, really, but it's before you get to Griffith. They have like a little creek and some crayfish and these beautiful ferns. And you walk down these paths. And people used to go there for brunches, and they had where you could cook out and have a nice lunch and stuff, you know. But there's a picture-- somebody took a picture. It has all the teenagers in junior high. And I'm on this end of the picture and, about eight or ten kids later, Carmen's on the other end, at the same picnic, in the same picture, and we don't even know each other. So we always laugh about that.

MASON: Did you know all of the same people because of your class backgrounds and educational backgrounds and you just moved in certain circles?

RIDDLE: I guess it was like-- See, I guess in those days, in the black social circle, it wasn't so much education as it was, like you said, it was like families. Like, you know, there were postal people, all kinds of--



[tape recorder off] Black community, the social community, it was like-- If you could mark the decline of it, it's probably the beginning of the so-called "year of integration." Because before, when it was like segregation, blacks had to depend much more on themselves and their organizations and their structures than they did after they say, "Okay, everybody's equal." Although that's always been a lie. The blacks abandoned their own entrepreneurship. One of the main reasons in every black city there was like a main black street was because the black businesses were on that street. That's what made it the main black street.

MASON: And in L.A., it was Central Avenue.

RIDDLE: Yeah, right. And it was like the shoe stores. In fact, one of my best friends in high school, his father owned the Dunlap Shoe Store on Vernon [Avenue] and Jefferson [Boulevard]. I mean, Vernon and Central [Avenue], right on the corner. You know, everybody went and got their shoes at Dunlap's. I mean, everybody used to crack up because everybody had on a pair of Lorenzo's father's shoes at one time, because that was a very successful-- He had good quality shoes, but you could get them from a black person. You could try them on. Some of those stores, they probably wouldn't let you try them on.



He's just a good example that black businesses changed. I was in a barbershop this morning, and I was thinking, "Boy, if I ever had a barbershop, my barbershop would be called the 'Philosophical Barbershop.'" Because when I was a kid, that was a seat of knowledge and information and discussion, like in Eddie Murphy's Coming to America. I remember those kind of barbershops where you had to remember when you came into the barbershop so nobody could get their hair cut ahead of you. But then there was always conversation about politics and about the neighborhood and philosophy. And there were like almanacs, "Man, look in the almanac!" "Willy's right. Nineteen twenty-four." "Joe Louis knocked out Max Schmeling in March such-and-such, 1938." "Yeah, Fred, you right." But rather than just argue, they always referred to the almanac. And they always had an almanac. It was funny, because even as a kid, these men-- You couldn't jump in. But it was funny, all these different characters in the barbershop. Some coming to get their hair cut, some just coming to hang out, some just popping by and leaving. But there was always like this turnover in the barbershop.

But I was in the barbershop this morning and the barbers didn't come in the door and say, "Hey, hello." One barber out of four came in and said hello to the



people who were sitting in there. There's no interchange between the barbers; there's no interchange between the customers. It was like the epitome of American evolution to individualism, where everybody's afraid of everybody. Nobody talks to anybody. See, but that's transferred over to black people, too. And yet, we're basically a very verbal race of people, a very communal race of people at one time. We all came out of communal structures in Africa that had communal societies where everybody was related in activity to everybody else. You just didn't have a whole bunch of people who were in the particular communal structure who had no role, nothing to do, no purpose, just sitting around. You didn't have that. We didn't have that until we got to America, and it got abstract. I mean, there wasn't anybody just, "Man, where's the rest of the tribe?" "Oh man, they just sitting down on some logs down in the woods just poking sticks in the ground and feeling sorry for themselves." I mean, all that stuff came-- It was a made-in-America label.

MASON: What was the religious background in your family? You have spoken of a couple of preachers. Or your parents, what were they?

RIDDLE: Well, I don't know. I can remember my mother going to the--I still remember what it meant--the AME,





the African Methodist Episcopal church. And when I was in Bakersfield, my grandmother's church was right-- I mean, she owned this piece of land. She lived on one corner, and there was a house full of these people known as the Tomlins. I mean, they were really poor. It must have been about thirty of them, it seemed like, and they just wore the house to the point where the house just fell down. So then there was this big vacant space. Then right across from that was this church on the corner, and that's my grandmother's church. So all she had to do was walk across the yard to get to church. And she would make you go to church every Sunday. All summer, you'd go to Sunday school. Then Sunday school was over and you came home and you had to hang around for about an hour and eat something and then she dragged you back to church. You sat in there for church, and those pews would be hard and just be flattening out your behind. You'd be fidgeting and the old people fanning. And you couldn't play cowboys on Sunday or play cards or go to the movies. You couldn't do nothing on Sunday. And then across the street from my grandmother was a Holiness church.

I hope that God forgives me, and the Holiness people, but my sister Joanne and I-- See, we used to like to always sleep outdoors. And when we slept on the front



porch, that was a favorite place to sleep. But the Holiness church went on all night. And they had like sextets and quintets and drums and, I mean, trumpets, just like a jazz group. They'd be playing those, and you could just hear those people clapping and stomping and these horns blaring. So we would always go over there. But when you went in the church, we'd sit near the back doors, because they always had the doors open because it was always hot. And the people would be jumping and shouting and be right with this music. And they would actually get to the place where they would start-- Well, we didn't know they were speaking in tongues, but they would transcend their existence and come over to the Lord. And we used to think that was the funniest thing you could see. And we would sit there, and we'd be trying to-- [stifles laughter]. And then when we just couldn't hold our laughter anymore, we'd just bust out laughing and run out the door. And nobody ever stopped us or told us that we couldn't do that, so that's a part of my church experience. We used to take all our kids to church. We used to take them to an Episcopalian church over on the east side, because we liked Father Moore. He always had these big things of incense and they'd smoke up the whole church, and we liked that. Then when we got older, we started taking our kids to a more modern church



called the Church of Christian Fellowship. His theology was like current theology, how it related to people with families bringing up kids in the 1950s and sixties.

MASON: So it was interdenominational?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

MASON: Non-denominational?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So we went to that until we moved. And then when we moved here I joined--all of us joined for a minute--the Reverend Albert Cleage's Black [Christian] Nationalist Church, the Shrine of the Black Madonna. That's the first time I ever heard that God was black and Jesus was black and it scared the hell out of me at first, but then it made sense. I mean, because all the happenings in the Christian era, the time of Jesus' happening, there was black people. And then when they were telling you about he had skin of copper and hair of lamb's wool, that don't sound like no white folks. So then they started pointing out all the other implications and things about Abraham and different things where you could see quite easily where it could be black. And so--

MASON: One of his concubines was African.

RIDDLE: Uh-huh, but--

MASON: Did you do a--? I think somebody told me you did a commission for that church.

RIDDLE: Yeah. I painted the murals in the church.



MASON: Where is the church located?

RIDDLE: The murals are there, but they dropped the ceiling. They used to have one of those vaulted ceilings like in the old theaters, like the old shows down in Los Angeles, like the Pantages [Theater]. And then they had the ornate theaters.

MASON: It would be like the Mayan [Theater].

RIDDLE: Yeah, yeah. And this was an ornate theater here. I think originally at one time it was called the Gordon [Theater] back when that area-- That area was the first suburban area of Atlanta, a white bedroom community area. And they had this theater called the Gordon that had-- When the Black Christian Nationalists first took over the church, it had these huge plaster reliefs of these Aryan kind of semi-nude men and women, but they were white. But they were more Aryan than Greek. They were like in the old Greek statue kind of thing.

MASON: Yeah. It sounds like something they'd do in the thirties.

RIDDLE: Yeah, but you could tell that they looked more like the Hitler supermen and women. They definitely had that European character. They were definitely pure white. They were all-- You know, that was the decor. So they took some chisels and just knocked all that out and cleaned it all up and replastered the walls. So I painted





four sixteen-by-twenty foot murals in there. And then when I got through, my kids started dropping out of church. They wanted my wife to be in charge of the nursery, and here she had just had six kids, so she didn't want to take care of no more kids in life. So she quit, then I quit.

MASON: What were the murals called and what did they look like? They're still there, you said.

RIDDLE: No, they're covered up.

MASON: They're covered up.

RIDDLE: They're not painted over, but--

MASON: They dropped the ceiling down.

RIDDLE: They dropped the ceiling down. The place was so tall, they could drop the ceiling down and still have probably about a sixteen foot ceiling.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: And it would still cover the bottom of the murals.

MASON: I see. So they're there and they're not really being taken care of?

RIDDLE: Who knows. But I didn't paint them to-- See, this friend of mine, he painted his on plywood and put the plywood up on the wall. He painted the pieces behind the altar. And I painted mine right on the plaster because I thought it was more--



MASON: Permanent?

RIDDLE: No. When the building goes, the art goes. I don't believe in saving art. You know, because I just thought when the building is gone--they tear down the building or it falls down--the art is gone, too. But that seemed more in the realm of the artist to make it permanent, because nothing is permanent anyway.

Then that was basically church. Except we used to dress up, clean up, wash up all our kids and put them in line and march them off to church every Sunday. I still have pictures of that in memory and in photo albums. But here as older people, we-- I haven't been to church in so long, I'd hate to confess how long ago it was.

MASON: So, let's see. How was your family involved in, say, the civil rights movement?

RIDDLE: Which one?

MASON: Well, say, in the fifties in Los Angeles around, I don't know, the Rumford Fair Housing Act and those kinds of issues.

RIDDLE: Oh, I was in between, because I had joined the air force in '53 and I got out in '57. I was married and I had the beginnings of a family and I didn't really participate in anything. I mean, there was a lot of things that you saw, like--

You know, it really came down to what Malcolm [X]



said, "If you're south of the Canadian border, you're in the South." It didn't matter whether you lived on the West Coast, the East Coast, Michigan or Mississippi. I mean, again, to quote Malcolm, because he summed it up so well, "You catch hell in America because you're black, not because you're a Christian or a Republican or a Democrat or any of those other hyphenateds." I mean, black people just have had a harder time.

Los Angeles has a slicker way of segregation and prejudicial treatment than, say, Louisiana. Because in Louisiana, they just put up a sign, "No niggers allowed." But maybe in California they didn't have a sign, but they had the same mental attitude. I used to go look for jobs, and one time I didn't know I was being discriminated against. But now, in hindsight, I look back on some of those visual remembrances, and I see all the white boys going to get jobs at Southern Bell [telephone company] in T-shirts with cigarettes rolled up under their sleeve and I was dressed in a fine suit from Meyer and Frank of Portland, Oregon, and I couldn't get-- They took my application and said, "Well, we'll let you know." I can still see those white boys who took the test with me walking on back in the back, going to phase two, and I was going to phase out. So, I mean, you know, it's-- That part's the same. It's the same then as it is now as it



was epitomized by Rodney King and the insurrection. There's nothing changed. I mean, we left-- The most brutal police that there ever were to me anywhere I've ever been were right there in Los Angeles.

MASON: I agree.

RIDDLE: I mean, they were gestapo, you know? I mean, they would mess with you just to be messing with you. And traffic court--just like people came to say later--was just us. Traffic court was always blacks and Mexicans. It's just a system that we paid to keep people employed. The LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department], they were ruthless. They were ruthless before the Watts riots and ruthless after it and ruthless through Dead Wyler right up to Rodney King. I mean, they still sic dogs on black folks. I mean, that's cold-blooded. And with impunity. I hated the LAPD. I thought they were the worst people. And at one time, just before I left, they were averaging killing eighteen people a year under questionable circumstances, which is one and a half people a month.

I can remember one time they almost killed me for nothing. I was running to teach night school at L.A. [Los Angeles] High [School], because I used to teach night school over there. And I was late, because my friend and I, we stopped and drank a pitcher of beer, which I shouldn't have done. But anyway, I did. I had three





hours to kill between the end of school and night school. So I parked my car and I slid across the seat, and I jumped out on the passenger's side. I was going to run across the athletic field because my ceramic room was right at the gate coming off the track, and I was late. And out of the corner of my eye, I saw this car park behind me. I thought it was somebody else coming to go to night school. And I saw those doors open. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw one man reaching for something. And I stopped. It was two plain-clothes police that said I had run a boulevard stop down on-- I forget the name of that street down on the other side of L.A. High, now. And they thought I had seen them and I was trying to escape and it was a stolen car. They shot at me. If I hadn't seen them and just kept running, they'd have shot me. And then they would have said, "Oh, we're sorry. We killed this man by mistake." And then when they found out I was a teacher and that I hadn't stolen the car, they said, "Oh, well, you'd better get on to class." But they felt guilty because they was going to kill me. So, I mean, L.A.'s like that. It was then; it is now.



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RIDDLE: That's the environment, you know. But I'm getting up, on some levels, to the verge of art. So maybe I should back off from that.

MASON: Okay. So you went to school before you joined the air force, then? A little bit?

RIDDLE: Not really.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: I mean, I just went to play bid whist and hang out.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: But then when I went in the service, I came out-- You could get the GI Bill if you got good grades.

MASON: Okay. Where were you stationed?

RIDDLE: We were inducted in Los Angeles. And we got on this bus going up to San Francisco to a place called Walnut Creek, which had this Parks Air Force Base, which is where they had basic training. And, as black people tend to gravitate towards each other, sit together and talk-- Everybody had their orders in some brown envelopes just like these. So everybody pulled out their-- The bus hadn't been on the road ten minutes, and everybody is pulling out their orders looking at their name. And you



see "Riddle, John Thomas, Jr." Then it has the AFC--that was your air force identity. It's almost like your Social Security card. It said, "AF 1947 0629." The guy said, "You'll never forget that number." And you don't. I mean, like, because you say it so much--to get paid, to do this, to get tested on--that you always remembered your number. Your rank, your number, and all that.

Well, anyway, after every black person there was this N in parenthesis. Even though I looked at mine individually, I think everybody's got one. I see it maybe ten or twelve times. But I'm new to all these people and I don't realize that all the N's is next to black folk. So it doesn't take too much of the stretch of the imagination to hopefully think that means Negro. So I said, "What's this? Eugene Simpson, N. What's yours?" "N. Say, man, that must mean 'nigger.'" We were fifty miles out of L.A. now.

Now, we're figuring they do that to all the blacks so that, putting the best light on the picture, they don't want to get too many blacks by natural selection process into the same group. I mean, you might have a group of forty men in the training squad or something like that. Maybe sixty-four, because I think it was sixteen to each group and there were four groups. And maybe they might have by just natural selection put nine blacks over here



and only two over here. But this way they can say, "Dut, dut, dut, dut, black, dut, dut, dut, dut, black, dut, dut, dut, dut, black." And they can spread the blacks out evenly, thereby having less of a problem by having too many blacks together. Because they might get together and figure out some other racist stuff that was going on, right? So, I mean, this is like fifty miles out of L.A. And everybody already knows this much about it and we ain't been in the air force but an hour.

So then you find out when you get to technical school-- I got out of basic. When you get out of basic, they give you a stripe if you haven't screwed up in basic. So you become an airman third class. Yeah. So you get out of basic and they send you somewhere. Now, it's usually to a training school. Now, I was willing to go to Biloxi, Mississippi to go to radio school because I wanted to be on flying status. That's why I went into the air force anyway, because I wanted to fly all over the world in airplanes and stuff. So I look up, and they're sending me to Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Now, Cheyenne, Wyoming is a cowboy hick town. They had no blacks living in Cheyenne. No black men, no black women, no black families at that time. This was 1953. I got up to Cheyenne. That's where all of the menial service jobs are: supply school. That's where the school





was. All the menial stuff listed, all the no-rank. Now, the rank was down in Texas at aircraft and engines, air speed indicators. Everything, the technical, mechanical thing to make these planes fly, because that's what the air force is in business for. That's where the white boys went. I didn't know that until after I went through supply school, got my supply number. There was like a six digit number that said what your job was, and mine was in aircraft petroleum and lubricants. POL [petroleum, oil, and lubricants], or something like that. Anyway, that's [who] put the oil and the gas in the planes.

When I got to Japan, which was my next station, I'm out on the flight line, and all I see are white boys. You know, but I mean we'll talk to them, because I'm putting gas in the planes and stuff. And we're talking, "Where you from?" "I'm from Ohio, Mississippi," anyplace. You know, "Anyplace USA." "How long have you been in the service?" "Oh, I been in here eighteen months." You know, just basic talk. This guy's got three, four stripes on his arm. I only got the same two that I got when I got out of Cheyenne, Wyoming. I never got more than two the whole time I was in the air force. I used to look at these white guys--they'd be in-- But see, they want to keep you if you're highly skilled, because they spend a lot of money to train you. So they entice you with rank.



So all the rank is going to the guys who know how to fix the planes and do these technical things. But the people who do food service, make sure that the sheets and stuff get cleaned and all this menial stuff, they ain't going to get no rank. So they're giving all the rank to the white boys. All through the service I saw that.

And I'll end on my service by this: At one time, through the service, I was a veterans' counselor, and these black guys would come. This was the year when the navy and the air force and everybody was trying to purge as many blacks out of the service as they could. So they would offer these black guys general discharge, anything but an honorable. And they had these codes on your discharge forms that-- I mean, nobody knows that they're there, unless you have the discharge code book, which I had as a veterans' counselor. I had access to it at one time. They had the worst descriptions.

I mean, it would say K-3 in some little box. And all you see is you got a general discharge and you run out and say, "Man, look. I did my time. So give me a job?" See, because they would always say, "Have you been in the service?" And you'd say, "No." "Well, we can't hire and train you and we know Uncle Sam is going to draft you. You go take care of your service obligation and come back, and we'll give you a job!" That used to be the line



before you went in the service. That's what they would all say to you. These guys would come back, and up on here it would say K-3. And you'd look up in the book. And K-3 would be "homosexual tendencies." And this guy is walking around, and he may be homosexual, he may not be. But he's walking not knowing it says that. "Thief." I mean, it wouldn't be quite that bad, but it would be "distrustful, dishonest." And these employers could look and "Sorry, Mr. Jones. We don't have any work today." See now, they are shooting people down like that, and these people are running around thinking they got a good discharge.

Now, the service was doing that right up until the time where they said, "Let's have an all-volunteer army." I don't know if you remember that. Because it was a semi-peacetime. The white boys could make more money not messing with the service. The draft wasn't drafting people. So let's have an all-volunteer army. So blacks started gravitating towards that, because there's two things about the service: If you stay and you do your job, you're going to get promoted. And rank rules. A sergeant can tell a corporal what to do, a corporal can tell a private, a lieutenant can tell a sergeant, the captain-- I mean, it's there. It's the rank. And if you go against the rank, you get busted. You get put out of



the service for not cooperating. So here's a chance for some blacks to have a skill, have a guaranteed job--which is another hard thing for black folk--and have authority over other people based on rank.

So blacks gravitated to the service, the same way they did to the post office. Back in my mother's time, she worked in the post office. The joke was, "Where can you find more Ph.D.'s than anywhere else in black America? In the post office." Because even though you might be a Ph.D., you couldn't get no job, so you had to work in a post office. You were a clerk. They weren't usually carriers, but they were usually the clerks, the people who cased up the mail and got the mail ready for the carriers to take out. And it was the same there, except it was reverse. Blacks had seniority. And then, all of a sudden, the next thing you heard coming out of the Pentagon, there's too many black people in the army, too many in the air force, too many in the marines. We've got to abolish this volunteer service, because blacks was overusing it. It scared the hell out of them white people, just like you said about the art.

Anytime the white people see the black people making progress, it scares the hell out of them. It shouldn't, but it does. If you complete your education, and you start making headway, it's going to be, "Oh, we've got too





many tenured blacks on our faculty. Isn't that--" You scare white people, because you beat the system. You're not in the prison system, you're not on drugs, you're not a prostitute, you're not on welfare. You can beat their system. That makes you dangerous. They've got to figure out how to pick you off some kind of way. "Well, how'd this Negro get through? Where did we go wrong?"

[laughter] "Put out a study." [laughter] Those kinds of things. I mean, but that's America.

MASON: Yeah. Well, how long did you stay in Japan?

RIDDLE: Two years. Twenty-two months, actually.

MASON: Did you like it there? Or what did you get out of being in Japan, if anything?

RIDDLE: Well, I think the most memorable was the two seventeen-day ocean voyages to Japan. I look back and that was magnificent, being in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in the middle of the night with the moon shining on the water. Everything was silent, even on a night when there was no moon and it was pitch black and all you could hear was the sound of the water against the ship and the ocean in general. I mean, you couldn't see nothing.

That's spectacular: seeing the ocean-- We went through a storm, and seeing the ocean in a storm stage with huge waves and gray and misty and you couldn't see that far ahead of the ship-- The immensity of the ocean. It's a



good thing to put you in size and world relationship to your surroundings, to be just a little thing. I think about it now, and I think about-- That's one of my favorite things, is the middle passage. I think about how they used to talk about scurvy and beriberi, lack of fresh water and this and that. And then you think about those black people in the ship. But that was very memorable.

The thing that I found out, too, it was the first time I found out how much black people think alike, although we don't admit it and we don't cooperate with each other. I remember walking down in Japan in a place called Fukuoka City--that's where I was stationed, down at Itazuki Air Force Base on the island of Kiushu, down in southern Japan. I hadn't been there maybe a month, and I passed this black soldier walking down one of these dark streets. And he said, "Hey, brother." I said, "Uh-huh, what's happening man?" We did the usual black greetings, you know. "Where do all the black folk hang out?" I always remember that. You know, black folk always want to find out when they're in a strange place where do the other black people hang out. And then I noticed how many black people have mustaches and beards. And I used to wonder-- All black men have mustaches. You couldn't have a beard in the service, but they all had mustaches. "Why do blacks all have mustaches?" So I cut mine off because



I didn't want to participate in some blackness that I didn't know. I would just be carried along with the mass of black folk. Because I like to know why I do what I do, right?

I remember that. Then I remember that after you get over your initial culture shock about being in a strange place, you find out that the Japanese people didn't like us at all.

MASON: They don't like anybody who's not Japanese.

RIDDLE: Yeah, that's true. They're like the French on that level. But the white people that I was with, they thought the Japanese loved them.

MASON: They thought what?

RIDDLE: I mean, the white guys that were over there in Japan, a lot of them thought the Japanese people loved them. And yet, to me maybe because I have that-- See, we all have that antenna as black people. Anything racial and these little antenna come, and they be searching for the direction where the racism is coming from, you know. Overt, covert, still it would set off them antennas. I just noticed that they didn't like us. But I did notice that if you took the time to be involved in their culture, to learn their language to the degree that you were trying to deal with Japanese, to that degree they would accept you up to the point of what we call now in current jargon



the "glass ceiling." There was a certain barrier that you'd never cross over if you weren't Japanese. But they didn't see that. I used to always see this-- I still, when I think about Japan, I see this huge twenty-foot-high chain-link fence around the unapproachable parts of the Japanese culture that the Americans were not going to be involved in. So I remember that.

MASON: Were you interested at all in the art and architecture that was there? No?

RIDDLE: Uh-uh. [negative] The service is the dawn of my interest in art, though. When I left Japan, I went to Portland, Oregon, and I was a clerk. I sat at this desk right in front of this clock--although the clock was probably fifty, sixty feet away--but it was up on this wall. It was a big, old clock. And you could sit there and watch how much time you had left in the service. Tick tock, tick tock. And I mean, just sitting there I learned a lot of things. I learned that I smoked cigarettes every forty-five minutes. Because I was sitting next to this guy named Mudgett, a white guy. He smoked every fifteen.

Every fifteen minutes I could hear him rustling in his pocket, getting out his Lucky Strikes. And I was always looking at the clock, and I began to see that there was a correlation between 12:00, 12:15, 12:30, 12:45, and 1:00 and Mudgett digging in his pockets. Then I started





noticing that if he was on a time frame, I was too. And I noticed mine was every forty-five minutes I lit a cigarette. So then I got to the point where I wouldn't smoke as long as I could last. And I got so I could get to 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 1:00. Then I got to the place where I didn't have to smoke no more. So, I mean, I liked it for that.

There was a guy sitting over on this side. He was a staff sergeant named Tony Hoffus and he had been in the air force long enough to have been a prisoner of war in the Second World War. This was like '56 so, you know, he was a career soldier. He had a tattoo, one of those kind of prison camp tattoos that the Germans put on, like the Jews always show their number? See, they would actually take and tattoo with India ink a permanent number on you. He had one of those numbers from when he was in a prisoner of war camp. He had gotten captured by the Germans. But he was Dutch, so they didn't kill him like they might have a Jewish person. But anyway, he loved Rembrandt, and he was always looking at Rembrandt. He said, "John, John, look at this." And I'd look at Rembrandt. Then I started liking Rembrandt.

MASON: Was he a practicing artist?

RIDDLE: No, he was a connoisseur. He liked music and art. He was like the classic music appreciation person.



He felt that music, art was important in his life. He used to have my wife and I over to dinner, he and his wife, Katie. And they had like a Rembrandt--you know, it was a reproduction, obviously--of the girl with the broom in the half door. It shows this girl, she's leaning, looking out the half door, and there's a broom with her. And I liked that picture so much.

I mean, I learned from him a lot about art, but I also learned that in this modern age of black printmakers, for instance, and photo-reproduced artworks that everybody has-- That they're popular. Like Varnette. I mean, I know Varnette Honeywood, because she was a student when I was teaching at L.A. High. I never had her in a class, but I knew her then, and I still do. But see, black people will pay a lot of money for a reproduction of a print, not even a handmade one by the artist actually doing the work, but a machine-made copy in additions--like Ernie Barnes--of thirty thousand, right? And I learned from Tony that if you could go buy a reproduction of a Rembrandt for two dollars, that reproductions only have value aesthetically. They didn't have value of appreciation as art. They didn't have value of appreciation as an investment or any of that--just appreciation of the work itself. And it's hanging in your house because you like it.

So, I mean, I learned a lot of things, but I didn't



know that I was going to like art. Because I got out of the service and you could go to school on the GI Bill. I wanted to be a geologist, because I liked earth science. So I studied that through almost two years at LACC [Los Angeles City College]. The place where I used to go play bid whist, now, I was back at the same place studying. I got my first degree I ever got in any kind of educational institute. I didn't get a high school diploma; I didn't get a junior high diploma. I always hung with the bad kids, and I always managed to get kicked out of the school by graduation time. So the first diploma I ever got was associate of arts from L.A. City College over there on Vermont. And that was right at the time it was turning into-- The Cal[ifornia] State Pomona campus was on L.A. City College's campus. Then they moved out there, out San Bernardino freeway to where they are now. It's now Cal State University, L.A.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: But at that time, it was at City College campus. Then it moved out and started the campus that's out there now. A lot of my friends transferred, because they said they wanted to go to a state college. I stayed because it was cheaper. You could go to City College for six dollars a semester plus books. So you couldn't beat that.

MASON: No.



RIDDLE: Plus, I mean, it was right in town, whereas you had to go way out there to the San Bernardino freeway to get to-- It seemed like a long way, but after I started going there, it wasn't that long a way anyway.

But I got an associate of arts, and it was the first time I ever got to wear one of those caps and gowns. That kind of was very influential, because when I got to the junior and senior year of college, I made the dean's honor list. So I had gone off from being what my mother and father wanted me to be like when I was in public school to finally what I should have been. But it took the maturity of the service. I don't know. I come back and all--not all, but a lot--of my friends were dead, a lot of them in jail, a lot of them whose lives was all screwed up. So it was good for me to get out of L.A.

MASON: You can get that way from playing bid whist all the time?

RIDDLE: Well, that was-- Well, yeah. See, we used to ditch school and play bid whist and go over to this friend of mine, where all the kids hung out, named Earl Tatum. Instead of going to high school, we would go hang out at Earl's house and play bid whist and get in trouble. But you know, the weird thing is that there was no incentive even then for emphasis on black males to become all they could be. The emphasis then, as it is now, is a kind of





self-destructive thing.

I remember I did a piece of art once called The Pre-programmed, and it was based on the fact that black youth were pre-programmed to do what they're doing now. Except the drive-by shootings and the murder thing wasn't in it when I grew up, but everything else was. It was just negative behaviour. Negative outlook. Develop your exterior. Have a front. Be cool. Be hip. Even if you don't have nothing, look hip. Look like you had everything. Walk like you had everything. Have a pimpstep in your walk. Talk plenty of stuff, and let all of that exterior-- Stand on the corner with the other men and hold your private parts to show you was a man. All those other black games that we still play that spin off into basketball and other things. You know? But black people have always-- Black men have always emphasized the exterior, the illusion that "Yeah, man, I've got it all." They ain't got nothing. And everybody else know you don't have nothing, but nobody said, "Man, you ain't got nothing." They said, "You bad, man." They know you ain't got nothing. Talking about you bad because you got on some \$200 tennis shoes. So it was fronting then, and it's fronting now.

MASON: What medium was that piece that you were talking about?



RIDDLE: It was a painting. But I always have done-- Not always. I kind of wanted to just be an abstract painter. But then I remember when I read Seize the Time: [The Story of the Black Panther Party] in '68 and Bobby Seale said in there-- He's got a line in there where he says, "Art ain't shit." And when I read that I was just completing nine years of night school, because I always went to school at night because I always had a family. It took me nine years from the time I went to City College to the time I graduated from Cal State with a B.A. in education. It took me nine years of night school to pick up four years' worth of credentials. But, I mean, I never quit. I used to think, if you quit-- Wherever you stop on any odyssey in your life, if you quit, that's where you'll be. Now, you may have to cut back from running to crawling, but you've got to keep making a little forward progress. You've got to do that. Because once you stop, it's harder to start it all up again.

MASON: So what degree were you going for at night?

RIDDLE: Well, I switched from geology and earth science to art. And then I was in art and English. I said I'd better get a job teaching school, because I had a family. And then I switched from geology to art with an art minor and an English major. And then art, I started liking it more. So art took over as a major, English took the



minor. By the time I graduated, I had a B.A. in education with an emphasis on being an art teacher.

MASON: Did you have to pick a medium? Painting or sculpture?

RIDDLE: Actually, I started off painting, but I liked-- I found an interesting thing in school, because you had to take all the different classes. I can remember when I took ceramics just as an elective. And I remember one day sitting at the potter's wheel, and I was making-- Because they won't let you on the potter's wheel at first. They make you do hand construction, learn the theory and techniques and all of that, some glazes. The thing I remember was making a piece of pottery, and I lost it on the wheel. I took it off and I set it over there, and I started on another. I was centering and I happened to look over at this piece, and I realized that it was a three-dimensional blob. It created its own shadows, it occupied its own space. You didn't have to draw it because it was already there. You didn't have to try to render shadows and values and everything because they were already there. You didn't have to try to figure out where the opening in the piece would be, what they call the negative space, because it was already there.

I became intrigued with that. I said, "Well, I like sculpture better." Because even though I might not be



able to draw that exact edge that I want, I could take that clay and I could push it and bend it until I saw the formal relationship between what I was trying to do and what came in the next part. I could see that continuity because it was there. If you turned it real slow and it made sense over here, but you turned it over here and there was no relationship, then you had to effect some kind of change between this side and that side. And then you start thinking analytically, like, "What would an ant see if he crawled along the table and he looked up?" Because you've got all these views.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But you didn't have to draw them. Like, you try to sit up and draw six views of the same vase from one position. So you're only seeing one reality, the other five are your imagination. But if you put it on a turntable and you turn it slowly, you can use that energy that you're trying to imagine; you can put that direct energy into the transformation of concept to reality. So I liked that, you know. And so I began to think--

MASON: So you stopped painting, and then you went into ceramics?

RIDDLE: Well--

MASON: Well--

RIDDLE: Sort of.





MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Yeah, in a way. And then a weird thing happened one time, because I like printmaking, too. Etching. But, I mean, you had to work like hell for an etching. You had to work the plates and you had to ink them and you had to soak the paper and put it in a blotter so it would be just right when you put it through the press. You had to wipe the plates where the highlights were supposed to be and all the ink was in the right place. You'd run it through the press and then you'd take the paper and tape it up to the wall so the paper wouldn't get crinkled when it dried. Because it was really 100 percent rag--good paper. All of that for one print, and then you might not like it, you know. And I mean it was drudgery. But I mean, it was discipline. But it was a form, and I liked it.

Then one day I went to a faculty art show where all the faculty people had the chance to put their art up for the students to see. I think this guy's name was Mr. Fifer or something like that. Something with an F. Mr. Fiedler. And Mr. Fiedler, what had happened at that time, he was my printing teacher, but he had paintings. I always was familiar with his print work. And to see his paintings, I mean, it was like he had been completely unchained from the technical drudgery process to the direct process. If you want red, you stick your brush in



the red, hit the canvas. I mean, he had so much freedom and just energy and movement. And I was looking at his art. And I came back and said, "Mr. Fiedler, I noticed, when you don't make prints, you're so free." He said, "Oh, I feel so free. I may never go back to printmaking." Because he had just discovered this.

So then I found out that art is boring. So I found out that if you switched from-- You did sculpture till you got tired of it, then you switched to painting, and then you switched to-- At that particular time, I could do painting, sculpture, and ceramics. They were all a different medium. But by switching and always seeing what I saw as the relationship, anyway, between the three, I always had a fresh media to work with. That way I didn't get bored and stressed out by the fact that I'm tired of this, you see. So that way I felt like I could keep a continual kind of growth going, and that's how I evolved into always switching media. So like, right now, I'm painting, but I'm thinking I've got to move to assemblage, because assemblage is the beginning of the manipulation of physical objects, even if they're painted. Still, you've got to start using nail and glue and other things besides brushes.

MASON: What was the first assemblage that you can remember?



RIDDLE: The first ones I really did were-- I mean, I guess I had done some others. Well, I had been welding, too. I used to love to weld found objects. I think all my materials I wanted to come out of things that people had discarded that I could reclaim-- Burnish up, polish up. You always had to cut a piece or a part off. I had this rule: you couldn't take the found object in its exact context and stick it in some art. You had to cut a piece off; you had to do something to it so it wasn't the same as what you found. But it was still either symbolically recognizable as being what it was or fit some other purpose in the context of parts.

MASON: I think you have one picture of one of the earlier weldings.

RIDDLE: Oh, yeah. Those are funny pieces.

MASON: They're what pieces?

RIDDLE: That's when I used to sweep stuff out of the middle of the street.

MASON: Okay. This is from Black Artists on Art and it's called Street Trial and it's dated 1968 and it's welded steel.

RIDDLE: We were talking about how cold-blooded the police are. And that was like the police arrested you, tried you, and convicted you right in the street with their guns. That's why that man had that big hole in him. But



like all of these pieces-- I used to get up in the morning, like on Sunday morning, and take a cardboard box, a dustpan, and a broom, and drive and park.

I don't know how long you've been in Los Angeles, but at one time in Los Angeles they used to have these signs that the traffic department would put out and then pick them up every day. And they would say "No left turn." And they would put them right in the middle of the intersection. And they would be facing so that-- You know, what directions the people could-- If they didn't want anybody to turn left, they'd have two facing this way and two facing this way. So everybody saw "No left turn" during certain hours. Then they would come along with this truck, and a guy would pick them up and put them back in the truck. The truck would never stop rolling. He would just go real slow. He'd take them up and stash them somewhere till the next day. But now, in the center of the intersections, even after they stopped using that method of traffic control in Los Angeles, all the debris from the tires is pushed to the middle. It's still there.

If you drive through the middle of the intersection in the left-hand lane, [if] you get right in the middle, you'll see "od" from "Ford" where somebody hit somebody else and part of their grille parts had fallen off. Now, this was before everything was plastic, too. See, most of





the stuff in the street was metal. Now it's plastic and rubber, so it was harder to deal with. But there were always screws and nuts and bolts and bottle caps and all kinds of weird things that you would never expect. So I would go out and harvest the intersections. I'd sweep up five or six intersections, come home, dump the stuff out on a big table and sort the dirt. Because you'd get all the rocks and glass and everything, too. And if I found an interesting piece, I'd set that aside.

So I would have me this whole collection of just what I called fragments that I was going to turn into ghetto flowers. I was just going to take some brass rod and weld them, fuse them together by dripping. I used to have all kinds of methods. One time I took a hubcap. It didn't melt. I don't know what it was made of, but brass wouldn't stick to it. I could just put ghetto parts in there from the intersections, and they'd all kind of gravitate to the concave surface. And I could just use that and drop molten brass rod in there, and that would stick all these different parts together. Then I would have something that was shaped like the inside of the hubcap. But it was all these different fragments. So I put a stem on it, and it was a ghetto flower.

But then when I got more interested in the prison and in the police and all that, I started making people. But



these people actually evolved from ceramics when I used to do ceramics. This is probably a machine cut out that was kind of bent. And this is a glob of something that was in an intersection. I used to just go around just looking.

One of the most interesting-- I don't know if you know Bill [William E.] Pajaud?

MASON: Yeah, we interviewed him.

RIDDLE: Me and Pajaud-- He was at Atlanta Life. He was a curator for their art collection. He was an artist, but he had quit doing art though. He said, "Man, art's too hard. I quit. I ain't doing it." So I used to go get him on Saturday and drag him. "Come on, Pajaud. We're going to do art." And he would go sketch, and I would go sketch. But we sketched totally different things. But every Saturday morning I'd go get Pajaud and I'd sweep up some intersections and go to the junkyard and we'd hang out for maybe three or four hours.

I talked to Pajaud yesterday. He's in Las Vegas, now. I found a picture of his father [William E. Pajaud, Sr.]. His father was a musician in the Eureka Brass Band. He used to always do those Eureka Brass Bands. And I was in the library researching--that's one of the things I freak out on. I'd rather do research than the art. So I was in there researching one day, and I saw his father's picture in an old book of New Orleans jazz musicians. And



I said, "This has got to be Pajaud's dad," because his name was spelled the same, and I remembered Pajaud said his father played trombone. He was in the hall of fame in this book. So I xeroxed that page, and I want to send it to Pajaud. So I got his address yesterday.

But Pajaud and I would go out. I got to the place where I used to call it--it's a word that starts with an "R." I can't even think of it now. But it was like going out and finding junk. One of my games I used to love to play was-- Over on the east side there were still some railroad tracks, and some of these railroad tracks led to places where they ground up cars, smashed them up, ground them up into little bits--little twisted, gnarled, rusty bits of metal. They would ship them in these boxcars over to Long Beach. They had this big conveyor-- because I followed the trail one day, and they had this big conveyor. All the metal scrap would go up this conveyor and you'd see it dropping off, making noise by falling in the hull of this ship. This was like in the real early seventies, late sixties, between '65 and '70. All these ships had Japanese names: the Nara Maru, the Suzi Moru, the Ekudu Moru. All these ground-up car parts were going to Japan to come back as Toyotas, Datsuns, all these cars. But at the time, the Japanese hadn't come back. See, the Japanese just made compact cars originally.



MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Little gas mileage cars.

MASON: Yeah, because we have better steel than they do.

RIDDLE: Yeah. And they ground up our cars, took the ground-up parts to Japan, created these little tinny, thirty-mile-a-gallon cars, when we were getting sixteen and twelve, called them compact cars. It killed us. You could drive those from suburbia to Los Angeles. It saves huge amounts on your gas bills, because at the same time our cars were evolving to the big fins, and they were getting more and more gaudy. The gaudier they were-- The big headlights and ornaments. And here the Japanese were making these little compacts.

I did a piece of art about this. This is a divergence. But I remember one time there was a police station that's gone now. It was up on Pico just by Rimpau. In fact, that's the street I almost got shot on, was Rimpau.

MASON: Oh, yeah.

RIDDLE: It was right next to a Sears store up there on Pico. It sat right out on the sidewalk. It was a classic police station. It had the steps going up and glass balls on the little lampposts and you could look in there and see what was happening. So I used to like to go sketch in front of the police station. But it was in





the days of the Black Panthers and all that, and they thought that I was some kind of revolutionary drawing diagrams. They used to send people out to ask me what the hell I was doing and all this. And I used to like it after I got used to it. Because at first, they'd always send out some little rookie, and you could tell because his hat was all down on his ears. "What are you doing, fella?" You'd tell him and he'd be confused and he'd go back and they would send a more senior person out. And you could always get them to talk about the Jews. I was teaching in Beverly Hills, so it must have been '70, about then. You start talking about the Jews, and those old racist crackers would forget what you were there for. They'd start talking about the Jews, too. Then you'd let them run off about the Jews and anti-Semitism for four or five minutes. They'd say, "Well, see you later, buddy." And they'd go on back and leave you alone.

MASON: You were a friend after--

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. That's how I knew how to get rid of them.

So anyway, I was doing two kinds of sketches. I just wanted to sit there and look at the police department. Now, this was the Vietnam era, too, and the police they were recruiting were Vietnam veterans. They still were wearing their crew cuts and they had the-- I



remember one night I'll never forget. It was changing shifts and these cops came, they were going into the police station. There was about six of them, and they were kind of playing because it wasn't their routine. They got in line and one guy said, "Hut, two--" and they went marching in just like they were in the Marine Corps. But the other thing I saw was they all came in Datsuns and Toyotas. So I put that in my picture. Because, see, all the police at that time-- Not all, because-- Just like they were in Simi Valley, you know, where they tried Rodney King. They were all in Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach, Huntington Beach, all down the coast, which meant they had to come a hell of a long way to get to this police station in the black neighborhood up on Pico, to do their eight hours of occupation duty. And they drove these little compact cars, because they had a sixty-, seventy-mile round trip. See, I was looking at all that. That's how I remember when the Datsuns and the Toyotas were just little teeny cars. That's how I see that relationship through art. That's why, to me, I can see a lot of social relationships, which goes back to the beginning of this long discourse on Bobby Seale saying, "Art ain't shit."

MASON: Okay. You know, I should stop you here, because



the tape is going to run out and I don't want you to get started and then we have to stop.

RIDDLE: Okay.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 5, 1992

MASON: You were around the police station and Bobby Seale and--

RIDDLE: You know, I was right at a place where I met my first black artist--who I consider my first black artist: Noah Purifoy. I knew Ruth [G.] Waddy. I was out of school then, but I was at a crossroads when I read what Bobby Seale said. I didn't really want to do social commentary as much as I wanted to just do great big abstract, expressionistic pieces that let you have the freedom to splash color and do all those kinds of things.

MASON: Is that how you had been painting in school?

RIDDLE: No, I had never even done it. I had never considered it. I mean, it was just-- It was like I still got the urge for it. Maybe I'll never do it; maybe I'll never get the courage to just be abstract, because it takes a different courage to stand on a reputation of color and form and that kind of expression devoid of classic subject matter. You can get a reputation off classic subject matter. You can draw like Charles [E.] White: over and over are different images, but it still becomes Charles White's style.

So anyway, that's another thing. It was right before





the Watt riots, and I met Ruth Waddy.

MASON: How did you meet her?

RIDDLE: I don't remember. It's like when you meet people that you always have known and liked. Sometimes it's real hard to remember because maybe the meeting was so inauspicious that you just don't remember, you know. But you remember some of the things that came after.

I remember Ruth didn't live too far from me up Western [Avenue]. I lived at Western and Twenty-seventh [Street], and she lived just above Venice [Boulevard] on Western. So we were neighbors of sorts. I remember one time Ruth called one Saturday. It was a cloudy Saturday, kind of like this, except it was a little more threatening looking. And she said, "John, I want you to meet somebody. Could you come by and pick me up?" I came by and picked her up. She took me over to Noah Purifoy's house.

He lived on La Brea [Avenue], somewhere between Adams [Boulevard] and Washington [Boulevard], or Washington and Venice. Somewhere right in that part of it. We went over there, and here was this man living in this little house in the back. He had made everything in the house: the couches, the rugs, the beds, the paneling, the door. It was the most artistic thing. Everything had the stamp of Noah Purifoy: collector of odds, ends, scraps, discarded



stuff turned into really elegant things. So he talked and we talked and we got to be friends. It was probably '64, because when the riot came I was into collecting this junk.

MASON: That was Noah Purifoy's influence, then?

RIDDLE: Yeah. Well, I mean, he was an assemblage person. I liked assemblage, too, but I was getting ready to like it more than I had ever liked it. Because when the riots came, all these burned-out buildings were there. There were charred remains and this and that. What was really weird was I met some black artists poking through the ruins. And I was in there with my little box, poking through the ruins just like they did. That cash register was like-- I found a burned-out cash register.

MASON: This is called The Ghetto Merchant.

RIDDLE: The idea was to take a cash register and dismantle it with screwdrivers and stuff till I got to the part where the part I liked was left. And I just put some legs on it and called it The Ghetto Merchant.

MASON: Where did you get the--? Is all of this part of the cash register that you dismantled? Or--?

RIDDLE: No, it's junk. Now, see those others? Like that thing up at the top?

MASON: Uh-huh.

RIDDLE: I was telling you about when I went off on a



divergence about the Toyotas and the Datsuns and the little bent-up metal-- I used to love to walk up the railroad tracks, and I used to play this game. I'd take a box--I had this box that had a handle on it so I could carry it--and I'd walk as far as I could walk up the railroad tracks, picking up only those things that caught my eye. Because you saw a whole myriad of things, but you got to the point where your eye would see the thing you wanted out of forty things. Because you do it every day. You don't know what you're going to use it for in art, but you're walking and you pick up that. You could only walk as far as you knew you could carry that box back when it was too full and too heavy to carry. Now, if it took you longer to find interesting things, you walked further. Just grabbing up everything you saw, you couldn't walk as far because the box got heavy, and then you'd have to walk back to your car and throw the box in the car. So every day on the weekend I would do that, you know.

I used to go down alleys, industrial alleys, anywhere where I thought I might see something. Then I got to a place where, if my instincts told me to turn here, I'd go. I'd find things like the legs on that Street Trial. I found this place that did castings. And here, that man's legs were dripping from the foundries. I guess they dumped the drippings, and somebody picked them up.



I used to love to go to places that did fabricating. They had these big metal things [and] the trash truck would come and pick up the whole thing. I don't know if you've ever seen one. They have these long things-- They're made so that a truck can come and scoop them up, and it turns into part of the truck. They just haul the whole thing away. But people who do metal fabricating, they throw [out] all of their punch parts, bent parts, things like this thing. They throw out things like that that they've actually fabricated something out of. But I like them because the cut outs were clean, made by great big break machines where it would just punch a hole right through a piece of metal a quarter inch thick. So you get a nice clean hole rather than if you had to try to cut it out yourself with a torch. It would be ragged, and you'd have to file it. So you got minimalism with minimal effort. So I liked them for that.

MASON: Where did the legs come from?

RIDDLE: Oh, with some other junk I have. I used to have a junk pile in my backyard. In fact, when I left L.A., it took my pickup truck about five, six trips to the junkyard to resell this metal. And I was getting like eighty, ninety dollars a trip.

MASON: Wow!

RIDDLE: So I'd take my truck-- They'd always weigh your





truck with the junk on it. You unload the junk, then you put your truck back on the scale. They weigh it again, and they owe you the difference.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: So I was like making these trips and my truck was barely touching the ground in the front, it was so loaded down. But I had like these piles of resource material that-- Sometimes I would remember right away, "I've got some things that would go perfect here," and I could pull them right out. And I had some stuff that if I just went through the junk I'd find, "Ooh, this is nice." You know, so.

MASON: So if you left it outside it must have gotten rained on, as much as it rains in L.A.

RIDDLE: Yeah.

MASON: And probably the texture changed sometimes.

RIDDLE: Well, I used to--

MASON: Because I noticed these are all polished up.

RIDDLE: I used to try to shine the things up.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: That was part of it, too. But I tried to get rid of the rust. And then I would put polyurethane or something on. Wirebrush the stuff. I even got to the place where I found a guy who sandblasted, and I had him sandblast some things.



MASON: So that was an important part of the whole aesthetic of the piece? The shine and the--?

RIDDLE: Yeah. And the natural patina of the metal. So you've got a contrast between highly polished-- Because at the same time I was starting to see-- I saw David Smith, the minimalist sculptor. I didn't like his work, and then I saw a piece in front of a museum one night. It was in 1972, it was an art and technology show, and they had a David Smith out front. I was just going into the museum, and I saw the way he burnished those surfaces with his grinder. It was like it was five, six surfaces. And I'd always tried to get that effect of multi-levels of transparency as a painter, and here this guy was doing it on the surface of this metal. So I just freaked out. Then I started really looking at his stuff more closely. Then I started seeing the fact that one of the things about minimalism was that you could create the illusion of mass with his forms. They looked heavy and strong, but yet they were hollow. You had the illusion of mass without the weight of mass. So I started liking that kind of idea, too. He was a major influence on me. I mean, he's somebody I still like. But-- I don't know where I am anymore.

MASON: I guess the other question I had was, did they teach welded sculpture at school? Or was that something



that you had learned--?

RIDDLE: Not to me. No, because like, see, I went to night school. They never had sculpture classes at night. When I went back for my master's, I would have gotten a degree in sculpture, except they didn't teach it except in the daytime. So I've never had a class in sculpture.

MASON: It was just interesting. I was reading about-- When you read things about Mel[vin E.] Edwards and Ed Love, you know, they always say that they were attracted to welded sculpture. And I think Ed Love said something about seeing a piece of P'lla Mills in the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] collection.

RIDDLE: The same thing I saw.

MASON: Huh?

RIDDLE: Same one. You've got a picture here. I know it's the same one. It's the same one as--

MASON: Oh, yeah. The Star of Bethlehem. This was a page that talks about the--

RIDDLE: That was the P'lla Mills in the-- That was it, boy!

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: We used to love that. That was when I started liking sculpture, was in those days. This is the kind of metal that I used to go get with [William E.] Pajaud.

MASON: This is Control Force.



RIDDLE: I remember the day I found that. There was a great big gear ring in the junkyard, and I was with Pajaud that day. I used to like things like alarm bells and-- That was some kind of bird. I don't know what kind of bird that was, but it definitely is a bird with wings. And what is it called?

MASON: It's called Control Force. There's no date on it.

RIDDLE: No, I would have never called it that. I don't know where that came from.

MASON: Oh, okay. Well, this is from the International Review [of African American Art].

RIDDLE: People put titles on your stuff.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: If I did that, it was probably "Bird of Prey" or something, because I think that was an eagle, and it was like a bird of prey. But he had some kind of owl kind of bird, because they're birds of prey. But it was an Oalarmist kind of thing. Yeah, like how they always catch those-- Like they always have those birds of prey with snakes and things and lizards that they've caught when they fly back up on their perch. So I was probably dealing with that, because I see on there the fact that I used alarm bells.

I used to love to find electric boxes, you know, that





had fuses and things that were-- So that you could see that it was some kind of an electronically related thing. Schematic designs and things like that, because they always reminded me of technology.

MASON: How was technology important? Because I noticed most of the-- When you're talking about a lot of the junk for-- You know, getting junk out of intersections, you talked a lot about finding car parts and things like that. You know, why were car parts more attractive--? Well, you talked about that whole Japan thing.

RIDDLE: Well, because they were really good suppliers. I mean, all the junk in the intersection is car related. Because the cars had wrecks, the car tires swept the junk into the middle. You know, that was just how it accumulated, by cars going this way and this way and this way and this way. [tape recorder off]

MASON: I was just asking about your interest in car parts, your attraction to car parts and technology.

RIDDLE: Yeah, I was just saying that in the intersections, they were like the producers of the debris. But my real interest was in junkyards and scrap piles, because I was interested in welding. Now, Noah, his real interest was in--just to use him as an example-- He did his gathering from secondhand stores. Now, he would go into a secondhand store--I used to go with him sometimes--



he would go in there and he'd say, "How much for this pair of shoes?" And they'd say, "Those are two dollars, sir." And he'd say, "What if I buy all fifty pairs?" And she'd say, "I'll sell that to you for twenty-five dollars." He'd give her twenty-five dollars, pull out two big gunnysacks, throw all the shoes in the gunnysack, take them home and do a piece about shoes. He'd have all these shoes lined up, [and] that would be his piece of art. The same way that Wayne Thiebaud would paint slices of pie in the bakery shop showcase. So now that's where he got his, but I loved the metal yard.

I like the secondhand, like the flea market in Pasadena. You go out there, and these people are trying to sell memorabilia and things. But there's so much art stuff out there. If you go out there just thinking you're going to make some art, and you're not trying to get some collectibles, but something that strikes you-- And it's that same energy that's in the walking down the railroad tracks, playing "I'm only going to pick up that which catches my eye." And anything that doesn't really catch my eye, I'm not even going to give it a second thought. You get that same mentality, and you get accustomed. Because the human mind, once it adapts to a certain procedure, it can become-- The more it does it, the more sophisticated and the more it separates itself from other



human beings who don't do that. And then they say, "Well, that's easy." It may be easy what they see, and it may be easy the way they see you do it. But they may not know that you put ten years of practice and development into cultivating the ability to do this thing. Which isn't speaking about me: that's about anything that you do repetitiously and long enough. You become proficient at it.

So like my favorite was to just do-- Like David Hammons and another friend of mine, we developed this theory that if you see something you want out by the curb for the trashman, if you stop and you get it, then it's yours. But if you drive off and you say, "Gosh, I should have gotten that. Dog, I should have gotten that!" and you go back, it's never there. It's never there. The only time it can still be there is if you get down to the corner and turn around and go right back. But if you go on about where you were going when you saw it and then come back later, forget it. I mean I've got a whole collection of mental imagery of things that I should have gotten that I didn't. Michael Jackson one time. A life-size Michael Jackson sticking out of somebody's trash with the glove and one of those Michael Jackson poses and his Geri-curved hair and all that. And I said, "Oh, man." I drove on down the street. And all the way driving down I



said, "Dog, I could make a bad piece of art out of that. I don't know what piece it is yet, but I know I could use it." By the time I went back and got it, all that trash was still there, but Michael Jackson was gone. Somebody else said, "Ooh, Michael Jackson," and put it in their record room.

MASON: So when you see--?

RIDDLE: Anything that really catches your eye.

MASON: So you don't know what piece you're going to make. Or is the piece suggested by the thing that you find? Or how does that process work?

RIDDLE: Oh, yeah. I mean, a lot of times it's like-- My titles always precede my art. I always have a name of a piece before the piece ever comes. I may change the name of the piece after I get into it and make it a little more explanatory, but I always have a--

I remember one time I found a box, and next to it there was an old wooden door that somebody put out. It said "employees only" on it. You know, they always have that. Somebody had stenciled it on there. And I saved that part that said "employees only." I had that thing in my basement here in this house for a long time. And then one day I was thinking about the United States and Central and Latin America and South America, too, because I thought about Salvador Allende and [Augusto] Pinochet in





Chile and how [Henry] Kissinger, [Richard M.] Nixon, etc., all got rid of Salvador Allende in '72 because Chile was the leading producer of copper. This was before fiber optics and the microchips were really booming and everything. They were still using copper wire. And AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Company] and ITT [International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation], if you think about them, they were all copper wire. I mean, that's what their foundation was, copper wire. They didn't want what they considered to be a Marxist--even though he was elected in a democratic election--to be in charge of copper any more than they wanted Saddam Hussein to be in charge of the oil. Even though the British partition-- Iraq had made Kuwait at the turn of the century so that they could steal that oil out of there which wasn't theirs in the first place. But it's always the same thing.

So they got rid of Allende. And then I started thinking about [how] they got rid of Omar Torrijos in Panama. [James E.] Carter had just gotten with Torrijos and made a contract to cede the Panama Canal back to the Panamanian people, and all these Reagan kind of people going out of their damn minds, and right after that, now, Torrijos was in a helicopter crash. All of a sudden, who took his place? Manuel Noriega, you know, who we loved



right up until the time that we needed a scapegoat. So then we dumped him off because he wouldn't help us with the Contra training so that we could get rid of Daniel Ortega. So I saw all of this piece as evolving out of this "employees only." Who did they kill? They killed Maurice Bishop, they killed Torrijos, and they killed Allende, even though they had surrogates to do it. Still, they got rid of him. Then the only three that were still bothering them, really, that they didn't get to kill--although they intended to kill Noriega, it just happened that they didn't get him--Noriega, [Fidel] Castro, and Ortega.

I loved to look through American Rifle Association and hunting magazines, because they always show "Get this bullet!" And they show these bullets that can kill with the greatest killing power that you can get on a rifle. They show these mushroom bullet heads that are all flattened out and say, "Compare this with this. This is what you want." I always cut those pictures out. And so I collaged bullets that are spent and used in these ads. And I put one next to Allende, Bishop, and Omar Torrijos. But, yet, I have nice clean unused bullets next to Noriega, Castro, and Ortega, because they haven't knocked them off yet. I like to make those kinds of plays on things.

But when I got that door that said "employees only,"



I had no idea that the employees would be Pinochet-- I had this really nice picture of Pinochet and the generals all standing at attention. I collaged that in a very painterly way over the part of the door that says "employees only." And then I show, on the outside edge, a separation of about six inches of the non-employees to be assassinated, because they don't fit in with what we want South America, Central America to be.

MASON: That's in the William Grant Still [Community Arts Center] show that's up now.

RIDDLE: Yeah. That's--

MASON: What date was that? That was in '70 something.

RIDDLE: My piece has evolved. I mean, I've been working on it ever since I thought of it. It probably took me about two years, but I didn't paint on it every day. I might see an article in the newspaper or something and say, "Ooh, this fits." And then I'd go back and work on it. But I like to let them evolve because-- I mean, the reason is I had no idea that that would become what it was.

MASON: Well, I was thinking that since you've done so many things, even though it's really artificial to divide everything up, maybe we could just talk about-- Since we're talking about sculpture, maybe we could just talk about sculpture and then assemblage and then ceramics and



then painting, even though it's kind of all mixed up together.

RIDDLE: Well, I don't mind. It would probably help you.

MASON: Yeah, it would help me. [laughter] That's what I'm saying, it would actually help me.

RIDDLE: You set it up like you want it. I don't have any problem with that.

MASON: Okay. Because otherwise I'll just forget or-- Because we were talking about assemblage. We haven't talked about your Made in Mississippi series and how that came about yet. I wanted to ask you--

RIDDLE: That was a funny thing.

MASON: What was one of the first pieces of assemblage that you saw? Was it the Watts Towers? Or was it another--? I guess I'm wondering what gave you the impetus--

RIDDLE: I was still painting when I saw Watts Towers.

MASON: So I was just wondering, what was the impetus for feeling that junk could be art?

RIDDLE: Well, back to-- Like I said, I saw how Noah did it, and then I saw-- I was attracted to it because, again, it came out of that prior ceramic experience of the manipulation of real things rather than trying to draw the real thing. Because I know in drawing, if it's not quite right, you've got to erase it. But if it's not quite





right in metal, say it's stiff metal, you can heat it and bend it until it's right. The rightness of it comes from as you bend it; you see maybe it crosses over another form that's either in front of it or behind it. And all of a sudden you see a nice connection between the two. So that in the--we're talking about assemblage now--additive form of sculpture rather than the-- Well, it could be subtractive, too. But a good example was I did a piece of Malcolm X.

It was supposed to be a man who had been down. So I let myself lay on the floor and I studied the way that you would normally get up if you were flat on your back, but now you're coming up. You would have one elbow up, pushing yourself up; your legs would be a certain way. So once I got that, I made a wax model of Malcolm. I was almost through with it, and I went to the flea market. My son [Anthony Thomas Riddle] was going to look for comics and I was looking around. He was looking for comics; I'm looking for what I want to look for. And I saw a blowtorch, an old-fashioned painter's blowtorch that they used to use to heat up paint. That was before they had chemical paint remover. They would heat paint with this blowtorch, and then they would take a putty knife when the paint started blistering, but before it could catch on fire, and they would scrape it off. That was one of the



ways-- They probably still do multilayer, but now they've got chemicals [where] it would come right off easier.

It's a piece of art itself, the blowtorch. But I noticed when I put it under Malcolm-- See, Malcolm's hand had been-- I didn't want to do a real hand with fingers. So, I mean, I made it like a hand-- I made this part of the hand, actually. I had Malcolm's hand coming up, and it was turned this way. And I noticed, one day, I had this blowtorch and I just stuck it up under there to say, "Suppose Malcolm was coming up off the ground with a blowtorch in his hand. That would make an extra serious piece. I mean, Malcolm's been down, but know he's coming up to put some heat." So I really liked that idea. But, now, the unexpected came when I got behind the hand and the knob on the blowtorch is like--it's got little notches in it all the way around so the guy could turn up the fuel and increase the flame. But it's just like in the Adinkra symbol book that shows a symbol that has eight notches in it, and it's the star which is the son of God. You know? So I saw that. But also, with his hand going like that, it's like the star and crescent. And all of a sudden, I saw all of these Muslim connotations just because, now, there's a blowtorch in Malcolm's hand, where that was never the intention when I made Malcolm's hand.

So I see a lot of times in the development of a



piece, if you let the piece develop for a while, and then when you don't see [anything] [John] Coltrane like about it-- Or you don't see spontaneity, where you're contriving parts instead of the parts just spontaneously-- Like when Coltrane and them would be playing some jazz, you know. All of this skill is there, but the show, like an art show, is when they're playing extemporaneously, and an accumulation of all their skill, all their ideas, their playing right at the ultimate minute of how they're thinking-- If it wasn't for a recording, a lot of times they might not be able to replay that. They might be able to transcribe it and replay it here. But if they don't have that, the only evolution on the piece is coming out as they play the changes and the things that they achieve. They say, "Yeah, I've been trying to get to that."

The same thing happens in sculpture. I mean, it happens in painting, too. But that's why I liked-- In sculpture, you're dealing with real objects, and you have the ability, in this case, to mix recognizable, discarded junk with lines and images that you've created. So that pretty soon this three-dimensional collage of parts or assemblage becomes like [Louise] Nevelson's pieces: if you take it out of context, it's a whole bunch of banisters and wood turnings and different cut outs and things. But if you take it all and put it all in a form



and paint it all one color, then it become one thing with a whole bunch of very interesting subparts contained within the boundary of this one thing. So I like sculpture from that standpoint. And I love things in the streets still that get run over and smashed, because they've acquired their shape as art parts accidentally. Nobody sat there with a hammer.

There was a piece in the Grant Still show that I still-- This is a still assemblage. I wanted to tear open some bags, because I found all of these wonderful bags with Statues of Liberty printed on them. I wanted to tear one open to show Nixon had been busted. But [when] I tried to tear a bag, I was caught up in this "How do you tear it?" because it's a conceived thing, the pressure. And I didn't want that. So one day I took it to work and I got a plastic bag, filled it up with water, put the plastic bag inside the paper bag, went up on the upper level above where we parked this morning, and threw it off the upper level. And it hit the ground. The bag tore and splattered in every which direction. And I ran downstairs, and it was the most amazing thing. The part of the bag that had the Statue of Liberty didn't get one tear on it. The rest of the bag just was torn to shreds. And I took it like I used to see my mother do with Ivory Snow. I used to have Ivory flakes or something you used





to put on fine sweaters, like wool sweaters and stuff, because you had to wash them by hand. Then you would put newspaper out and you'd block the sweaters out. You laid them out so that they were just like they were. And then, that way, when they dry, they wouldn't be all distorted.

MASON: Yeah, they would keep their shape.

RIDDLE: Yeah. So I did that paper bag the same way. I ran home from work with the paper bag. It was still wet. I went down to the basement and laid it out, made sure it was just like it tore. And then I was able to create the piece Nixon: the 20th Anniversary, Busted. Because he got busted just like that paper bag, just like brothers get busted. But, I mean, it was like that accidental thing. I like that in sculpture.

The sculpture and assemblage parts that are in my head now, I would like to create certain parts out of wax and cast them. My plan is to cast them in my backyard, somewhere along the creek so that I have some nice setting, and I'll be out there. You know. But the idea of making parts or casting real things, which is easy to do in casting-- But being able to create the exact parts you want and mix them with things that you find and weld them together to create the object that you're trying to express yourself with-- See, I mean, to me, that's like the ultimate: to be able to deliberately create



something, but combine it with something that you had no hand in developing its shape. You only have a hand in making it part of this other thing, to become a whole something.

That's why I like sculpture, though; it's because-- The other thing I think about sculpture is that the first time that you make something that you can stand on, that you can actually make something and then stand on it, that's amazing, because it changes your whole view. Because if you're five feet tall, everything you see is basically from the five-foot level. But if you make something that makes you five foot seven, you actually have a different perspective on everything, because you're seeing it from a different viewpoint. I used to always think [about] that, plus something that could fall on you and break your arm or kill you--that you made.

MASON: Like the Richard Serra Tilted Arc kind of thing.

RIDDLE: Yeah. Well, I mean, definitely if one of his pieces fell on you, you'd die. Or you'd be hurt when one of those big old poles flying over hit you.

MASON: Why was that danger an important element in your work? Or potential for danger?

RIDDLE: Not so much that, but the fact that you made something that now you have to wear a hard hat to be around. I thought that was nice. I mean, just that idea



that something that you made was big enough to kill you. You know, it's just like when Christo did those pieces, and the umbrella flew off. And I mean, it's sad the woman got killed, but--you know--it's the size of the umbrellas and the ability of those umbrellas to pick up currents of wind. Obviously, he probably didn't anticipate that one would ever kill anybody. But just that idea that the pieces assume a kind of life of their own physically, aside from what they look like. But that's what sculpture has that painting doesn't have, because painting is all-- Painting is more like an illusion. You can create depth, you can create photo-realism, you can create excitement with color, but it's much more of an abstract thing. And it's all what you can do through your hand, through this inanimate object, the brush, back to the bristles which you are actually putting paint on. Sculpture is just you get more dirty, it's more physical work, and that's nice to be--the physical thing. You're wrestling with things. You've got to see "Can I make something big enough to--? I've got to get a chain hoist in my studio so I can go-- Because it's too heavy to hold in place."

I remember one thing about sculpture, too, that-- this is in the era of table model sculpture, which could hardly fall on you or anything--you needed three hands.



You needed a hand to hold the torch, a hand to hold the rod, and a hand to hold the object that was being welded. I hated clamp-on tools; they were like illegal. So I discovered balance for myself. I mean, I went through a year where I used to think, "If the piece I want to attach can stay right where I want it, because it's balanced--" A little part is over here, and a little more is over here. If it can stay-- Sometimes I'd spend a half hour, and just when I got ready to weld, a piece would fall off. If I could let it stay in place long enough for me to weld, then I felt like, physically, because of balance, that's where the piece went. So that became like a law for a long time, that I would practice that.

MASON: Well, in the earlier-- This one doesn't have a pedestal, Street Trial. But others do have a pedestal for some-- Was that a decision: pedestal or not pedestal?

RIDDLE: Only in that it was easier to make things stand up.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Whereas, like, I could see now, where the three points on the plane would be-- [tape recorder off]

I'd like to get to the place where I did architectural sculpture. I gave up printmaking because it's not healthy. Because you use too much petroleum salts, so I didn't want to-- Now, that kind of way isn't





dangerous as much as it could be foolhardy. If you know the chemicals are carcinogenic or that they can be liver damaging and different things, you know, nerve damaging-- I mean, it says that on all the warning labels. Why keep doing it? So I mean, if I die, I don't want to die because the chemicals killed me. If I had to go art-wise, I'd definitely want it to be an accident. "Yeah, he died while he was doing his art." You know, I'd rather have that than, "Yeah, he knew he was going to die, but he kept doing it anyway." That seems somewhat stupid. But anyway, I switched to painting.

MASON: Well, I wanted to--

RIDDLE: I'm sorry.

MASON: Before we talk about that, I wanted to talk about how the Made in Mississippi came about.

RIDDLE: Yeah. That's what I'm trying to get to now.

MASON: Oh, okay.

RIDDLE: But that's cool. That was the reason I said I switched to painting. But, as I'm painting right now, I'm beginning to put physical forms in the painting. Like I'm actually beginning to attach things, because that's a prelude to sculpture, which those boxes were. I had said earlier I wanted to get a sculptural degree, but I couldn't get one. And so the man at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Los Angeles] said he gave me the option in graduate school



to-- As a painter, I could do assemblage, and I couldn't actually do sculpture. So in my junking forays--

I remember one day John Outterbridge and I were out junking around--that's not the word we used to use either. But I was out there somewhere, and Bridge knew where this junkyard was. In fact, those pieces in that one, the Hoe, because it's a hoe and some stove legs-- I was at one of Bridge's junkyards when I found those parts. We were someplace looking for junk, and this guy had ammunition boxes. They used to hold mortar shells, circa the Korean War. The guy had a big stack of them. I said, "Hey, how much for one of them?" And he told me. I said, "How much for twelve of them?" And he gave a real--like two dollars a piece or something. So I bought twelve of them. And they sat around in my basement, in my backyard, in my studio for a long time.

One day I started thinking about them, because I had to do a master's thesis. And the guy said, "You could either do a written thesis, or you could do a visual presentation," but you had to write a paper. So I wrote this paper called "Spirit vs. Technology," and my premise was that technology was a corpse unless it was imbued by spirit. I used the analogy further that you could take a car, which was a technical process, and you could let it sit in your driveway and nobody would drive it, nobody



would touch it, and it would slowly deteriorate. If it sat there long enough, it would deteriorate, even if it had been brand-new, to the point where it was inoperable. It took the spirituality of a person getting in there, turning on the ignition, starting up the car, doing all the processes that are involved in driving. So technology without spirit couldn't function. And then also, from the other angle, that famous line in George Jackson's "Technology was a headless beast at the controls of a machine gone mad," talking about American ideas and things. So to me, I was trying to show spirit and technology.

I think that first piece that I tried to use was Bird and Diz. It was right there. I was showing that Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie-- I had found some old horns and some pressure gauges and things. I remember going to a secondhand store and buying a beautiful piece of dark blue pinstripe suit and cutting that up in there and putting that as a liner in the bottom of the box and then showing that Dizzy Gillespie and Bird [Charlie Parker] were a good [example] of how the technical process, that created those instruments primarily for classical music, had no idea in the creator's mind that Bird was going to pick up the horn and play it like he did. Or that Dizzy Gillespie-- Or that Bird and Diz and



Thelonius Monk and them would all come together and make be-bop. That's what spirit does to technology. Spirit can take technology on an evolution that the technology's creator never intended it to go. So then I took the-- I'm sorry.

MASON: Did you work on the surface of the boxes at all?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. Like I said, I lined the inside of the musical side with a kind of suit material that the brothers used to wear on those sets back in the old be-bop era when the musicians were well-dressed and everything. Then I took the front surface of the door--

I had an artist friend named Danny [Daniel] LaRue Johnson. I remember when Danny and I were first starting to deal with art in L.A. I was over to Danny's house one time. I was sitting there talking, and he was rubbing on this box, on a piece of wood, a Joseph Cornell kind of assemblage. He used to do a lot of rat traps and paint American flags black and have black dolls caught in the rat traps. But he'd paint them all black, like Louise Nevelson, to combine all the different fragmented parts into the commonality of being one color. So that made them one, even though they were separate. I always liked how-- But he was rubbing on this box, and I said, "Man, why do you spend so much time rubbing and polishing?" He said, "Some people call it the finish fetish," and he





started laughing. He said, "But, you know, I do it because not only is it peaceful, it--as an artist--gives me time to think and relaxes me." He said, "But it's craftsmanship." And he said, "No matter what a piece looks like or what it is, if it has craftsmanship as an integral part of it, it will always be presentable just on a craftsmanship level."

Now, once you draw people into the craftsmanship, then you rip them apart with the concept within the craftsmanship. You see, craftsmanship has the ability to draw people to itself, just because it's a thing of such quality that everybody recognizes it. Well, not everybody, but enough people. You know, they'll say, "Well, that's--" And they'll touch it, and then all of a sudden, they'll look around the edge of this smooth surface and here's something that's as sharp as a razor blade trying to cut their--



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RIDDLE: That's the only piece in that whole series where the parts extended outside of the box, too. I mean, I did that on purpose, because I wanted to show that the brothers' technology was breaking out of the boxes.

Now, I used ammunition boxes for two reasons, because-- They had those rope handles so they could hang. All I had to do was take a two-by-four and mount each one on a two-by-four and I could exhibit them like that with the doors closed so that the viewer had to unlatch it-- it's just a simple latch on the front--but they had to unlatch those two hinges and open up the art to see what was happening in there. So I kind of liked that, because it made people have to do a participatory thing.

So it was really my master's thesis, and that was nice. It was a self-contained kind of storage thing, too. You'd close the lid, put the little latches on, and stack them up, because they were meant to be stacked up on top of each other. Therefore, they wouldn't take up much space; the lids kept dust and dirt out of them. They sat over at Bridge's house from the time I left Atlanta to the time the California [African American] Museum bought them. So they probably sat in Bridge's house-- They bought them



in '89, I left in '74, so they sat at Bridge's house for about fifteen years, you know.

MASON: Were they all meant to be seen together?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

MASON: I remember I saw this show and I think there was one they put at the end that was closed and you couldn't open the door.

RIDDLE: I did that on purpose because I was tired of doing them boxes. I promised them I would have ten for the show, or nine for the show, and so I did one you couldn't open. There ain't nothing in that one. You know, like just humor. Humor and laziness. But I did that on purpose, because everybody said, "What's in that one?" I used to say, "You'll never know." [laughter]

MASON: You are very mysterious.

RIDDLE: That's assemblage, too, that Charlie Parker. I like the bebop era. So this piece has all assembled parts on the bottom. I put little boxes on the bottom that showed African instruments to show that their heritage is basically African instruments. But the rest of it's two-dimensional.

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: There might be some balsa wood thickness pieces in there like there's an African person over here somewhere that grew out of his bass fiddle. It's hard to



see in that, but I always liked that. That's a real picture that had Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and John Coltrane when he was a real young musician. He was in the background just asking could he sit in. And I always liked that because it has historical significance.

MASON: And here's an Olmec. Maybe it's an Olmec head. I don't know.

RIDDLE: Yeah, it's an Olmec. I like to try to show-- And then, again, there was Liberty.

MASON: Yeah, the Statue of Liberty.

RIDDLE: I was using Liberty in that case to say that--  
[tape recorder off] [Carmen Riddle joins interview]

MASON: We started off with Bill Pajaud. We wanted to get some of the older people in the arts community. We talked with Ruth Waddy, Betye Saar. And then we started to talk to people who were younger, but who had had galleries, like Alonzo Davis. And I just did Suzanne Jackson a couple of weeks ago.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Where is Suzanne?

MASON: She's up in San Francisco. She just got her degree from Yale. She just got an MFA [master of fine arts], and she's working in costume design right now.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, that's what she's doing?

MASON: Yeah. I mean she's still painting, but she's earning her living now as a costume designer in between.





Well, she says she hasn't really wanted to show yet, but I don't know.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She was doing those chickens when we saw her last time.

MASON: She's just trying to make money to get supplies.

RIDDLE: You know, before when you were asking about the different family stuff-- She has a whole family story that fits in very well with me. That's why--

CARMEN RIDDLE: What's that?

RIDDLE: Well, I told her about how the first house I ever lived in was your grandmother's, Alice Garrott's.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah. Well, our families knew each other generations back.

RIDDLE: And her family was one of the first black families in Glendale.

CARMEN RIDDLE: No, California.

RIDDLE: Yeah, but I mean when they lived out in Glendale.

MASON: When did they come to California?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, my grandfather was the first black dentist. And they came to California before slavery was over.

MASON: So he was before [John A.] Somerville then?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Somerville and my grandfather. Yeah, he said that was wrong. [laughter] So it wasn't--

MASON: Yeah, it's always wrong.



CARMEN RIDDLE: No, it was wrong.

MASON: It's always wrong.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It is wrong, because Dr. Garrott-- That's just something that's happened in the last few years that they've said Somerville. But Dr. Garrott was the first one, and then Somerville.

MASON: Of course, he wrote his autobiography [Man of Color: An Autobiography of J. Alexander Somerville], too. So he'd probably say, "Well, you know, I was the first."

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, there's an argument there. But anyway, they were there in the 1800s and everything like that. But our families were connected the whole time.

RIDDLE: We used to live close to each other. Her mother and father lived right almost next door to my mother [Helen Louise Wheeler] and father [John Thomas Riddle]'s two best friends, Ruby and Ollie Terry. And, yet, we didn't know each other.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And, you know, the thing that they had at the black museum-- You know, the California history thing?

MASON: Yeah, yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, our families are in there. Yeah, from that-- We went to that show the last time we were there. And so it was really interesting seeing that.

RIDDLE: She had parts of her family in it and parts of my family. And yet, we didn't know each other.



CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, we did, but we didn't pay any attention to each other. They used to have the pharmaceutical doctors and lawyers breakfast in Griffith Park every summer. They had a breakfast, and we always went. We saw a picture after we got married where he was at one end and I was at the other, and we didn't even know that we were both there.

MASON: Yeah, that's pretty funny.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He didn't start art until after we were married.

RIDDLE: See, she's telling it. She knows it. See, she actually saved me.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We won't go into all that. [laughter]  
But he didn't do any art until we were married. And then he did the same picture over and over again, on one piece of canvas.

RIDDLE: I just kept painting it over.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Because he was in the air force--

RIDDLE: And I threw it away.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He did the same piece over and over again, but it was something that he seemed to like and be interested in. So when he got out of the service, he went to art school at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Los Angeles]. But what I was going to ask is, now, who else did you see? Because, see, there was a time when all of



them-- It was so much fun in California, because they had this group of artists and families that we all did everything together.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: With Dan Concholar and Alonzo Davis.

MASON: Yeah, we interviewed Alonzo.

RIDDLE: And Bridge.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Dale [Davis] and Bridge and--

RIDDLE: And Yvonne Cole Meo.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And Betye Saar. And, of course, Ruth Waddy was always in on every-- She helped get the people together, too, along with Alonzo.

MASON: Yeah. At the same time, there was this other group of artists.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Who was that?

MASON: You mentioned Daniel LaRue Johnson and people like--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, Danny Johnson was along that time, but Danny was a very individual-type person. He wasn't a joiner. He was a very good artist, but he was not very sociable and he didn't want to be around other people. He took his family and went to New York.

RIDDLE: He preceded Mel[vin] [Edwards] and them to New York.





CARMEN RIDDLE: Mel was a friend of Danny's. Now, I guess, that was about his best friend. So they both went to New York.

RIDDLE: That was in '58.

MASON: And then he went to study in Paris.

RIDDLE: That was in '58, because he came by and said, "Man, we ought to go to New York." And I thought about it, but I was afraid.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, he--

MASON: But I-- Oh, I'm sorry.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Go ahead. Go ahead.

MASON: No, I was just going to talk about some of the other artists who were in the black shows, like [Los Angeles 1972: A] Panorama [of Black Artists]] and then they kind of went off on their own.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Who was that?

MASON: Like Fred [Frederick J.] Eversley and, let's see, Marvin-- Marvin Harden wasn't in the--

RIDDLE: Fred was real white. Because he went out to the white artists, because they were doing resin casts. He did those beautiful resin-casted pieces. But he was hanging out with the--

MASON: Plus he-- He really--

RIDDLE: He became an artist though. I mean, Fred became-- I'm not saying we weren't artists. But he became an



accepted artist in corporate America, because he had,  
like--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Commercially.

RIDDLE: Pieces in plazas and, I mean, before anybody was  
doing that.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah. He was more into crafts, and he was  
very commercial. He could make money off of-- Around  
whites a lot, you know.

MASON: Do you want me to turn the tape off? Or--?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh.

RIDDLE: No. Is it off or on?

MASON: It's on.

RIDDLE: Yeah. I tell you, you could edit this out. She  
knows a lot of stuff.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh. Well, I don't know. I didn't know you  
had the tape on.

RIDDLE: See, now she's going to clam up. She's not going  
to tell you about what her mother is like.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She doesn't care about that!

RIDDLE: Yeah, well, she asked about all the parents and  
stuff.

MASON: Yeah, well--

RIDDLE: Like, her mother is, right now, she's ninety-six.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She's probably ninety-eight, but she puts  
her age back.



RIDDLE: And she's blind, completely blind. And she lives by herself, and she do what she did.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She knew everybody in California.

RIDDLE: She's got like--because probably her blindness, too, but even before that-- She's the keeper of the history. She can tell you about every family back in certain eras and things and all the relationships between this person and what happened to that kid, this kid. It's amazing. I mean, she's like out of the tradition of the old African tradition where the Creoles and the people kept the oral history to pass it on. She has, outside of her blindness--and now she says she's tired of living so long--nothing wrong with her. I mean, she can bend down and get things out of the lowest shelf on the cupboard and not have to pull herself up on the countertop or anything. I mean, she fell and broke a rib when we were out there last Thanksgiving. She was healed in two weeks.

MASON: Wow.

RIDDLE: I mean, she's an amazing person. Her mother and father's side is a whole history. But without that part a lot of me is missing, because we've been together, like I said, about forty years, that I've known her.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We met the first day at City College, LACC [Los Angeles City College], and we've been together ever since.



MASON: Yeah. Well, that's amazing, because it's like most of the artists I talk to, and even non-artists-- You know, Cecil Fergerson talks about being married three and four times and stuff. I don't know how many times he's been married, but, you know it seems to just--

CARMEN RIDDLE: I know, everybody.

MASON: It seems to just really destroy--

CARMEN RIDDLE: They just didn't make it. You don't have Dan Concholar on there?

MASON: We have kind of a--

CARMEN RIDDLE: He doesn't do art now, but he was a great artist in his own way. But when his wife [Olivia Concholar] left him, he was just so crushed--

RIDDLE: Never done art since.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He went to New York and hasn't done art since.

MASON: Suzanne Jackson ran into him in New York.

CARMEN RIDDLE: New York, yeah.

MASON: But I can't remember what she said.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He's in--

MASON: He has some administrative kind of job.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, that's what he's doing.

RIDDLE: He promotes other artists.

MASON: Yeah, right.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah. But he was great. And he lived like





an artist. I mean, he and his wife just lived like artists.

RIDDLE: They lived on Budlong [Avenue]. They used to always live on Budlong.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They lived on Budlong, this old house, but they were both from Arizona. She was Hispanic. But their lives were so interesting. And then, David Hammons. I don't know if you know David Hammons?

MASON: Yeah. We were going to interview him, but he's living in Italy now.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah. David had a family in Los Angeles. Now, he gave up his family. He had the nicest wife and two little kids. They're grown now, but--

RIDDLE: Carmen, David, and Becky. Becky was his wife.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But he left his family in order to pursue his art career. So I felt bad about that, because I just don't think anything is worth that. But he has since gone on to bigger and better things in the world of art. But, you know, his kids kind of resent it.

RIDDLE: But now, one thing about-- Now David, he was a-- The thing good about David was he had a super sense of humor.

MASON: Did you say sense of humor?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. I mean, really, a great sense of humor, to me. It was the same kind of sense of humor that I had



one similar to. So we always saw the humorous side of all the things related to art, which gives you a whole other perspective.

MASON: Yeah. If you look at some of his pieces now-- I remember seeing a piece of fried chicken.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And the funniest thing is he's-- I call him a con artist, because at the museum he had a show here a year or two ago and he had ribs hanging up there. And the white people would come up, everybody had their champagne and [were] dressed up and everything, and they would say, "And, uh, how do you explain this?" He had been talking to us, laughing at how much money he had made, and he doesn't have to put out any money on these things because he just picks up stuff. He never pays for his material. When he did things with hair, he just went to the barbershops. And when he did [inaudible] art when he was here, you know, anything free. Then all his money just comes to him when he gets paid for it.

So he said, "Oh, yeah. These people, you just tell them anything." So the lady said, "Now, how did you happen to think of this rib. Is this a rib? A barbecue rib?" And what did he say? He said, "Well, yes. The way I feel about this--" And he went into some long dissertation, and she just thought it was great and brought her friends over. And that's why I call him the con artist. Because he does



stuff like bottle caps and then makes it into something.

MASON: Yeah. There's one in here that's like a basketball.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah. Yeah.

RIDDLE: He has ingenious ways of doing--

CARMEN RIDDLE: He never spends a cent. And I do admire him for his money-making ways, because he makes plenty of money.

RIDDLE: He's got one in that book where he's just got Skillets.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He just gathers up whatever he can free.

RIDDLE: Skillets in the Closet.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He never pays for a thing.

MASON: Yeah, there are the bottle caps.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah.

MASON: The basketball.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Uh-huh. And they didn't like it when he did a piece of art-- What was it?

RIDDLE: The one that he did on Jesse [L.] Jackson.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Jesse Jackson.

MASON: Yeah. How Ya Like Me Now.

RIDDLE: They painted him white.

MASON: Yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But he didn't mean that.

RIDDLE: They smashed him up with some sledgehammers.



CARMEN RIDDLE: And that must have really made him feel bad--

RIDDLE: He felt bad at the time.

CARMEN RIDDLE: --because he likes to feel like he's a black artist, and for blacks not to relate to it made him feel really bad.

RIDDLE: But see, he was too abstract in that-- I mean, for black people. Because one thing about black people, we're not abstract. We would like everything, like, what it is. We want it more simplified. I saw that in the movies.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I want to see people and color and stuff.

MASON: Yeah, but when you say abstract, I mean, you know, African art is really abstract. So--

CARMEN RIDDLE: I don't think so.

MASON: You don't think so?

CARMEN RIDDLE: No.

RIDDLE: No, I don't either. I think the African artists now who do art, it's somewhat abstract. But I think when it was in its original form--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Utilitarian.

RIDDLE: --when it was artifact-- Yeah, utilitarian. Because it wasn't really viewed in the sense-- I mean, be adding something that's not there-- It wasn't really viewed for its aesthetic. I think if the aesthetic was





there, it was there because of the pride and the tradition of carving, because they weren't looking at avant-garde things, they were looking at keeping a tradition through repetition. And the more you could keep the tradition, the better you were. Whereas in the Western art, which isn't artifact, it's like "Come up with this new thing and get it patented." And everybody says, "Well, Alexander Calder does kinetic art mobiles. Therefore, nobody else can do mobiles." That's why you don't see the advancement on his principle of balance and kineticism through mobiles, because if you do, then everybody would say, "Man, you're just copying Calder." So then what you might really feel would contribute doesn't get a chance to perpetuate what Calder did, and that's a sad thing, but that's the way the West looks at it. It's got to be something new and different. It's like new for new's sake.

Now, David's piece you just showed me with the bottle caps and the basketball, if you look at that from a distance, that has qualities of African art about it, just in the shape of the design.

MASON: The pattern.

RIDDLE: The patterns. I remember when David first-- We used to argue about that in the days Carmen speaks of. Was there black art in the days of the penitentiary and



all of that? Was there black art at the riots? You know, that was the big question. Is there black art or is it just black people doing art? Or is there such a thing as black art? And those arguments used to rage. And David used to be in the position that there was no such thing as black art. We used to get into almost cussing at each other about those. It was all in Alonzo's Brockman Gallery on Saturdays. The artists would meet. But it was healthy, because you had to come back the next time they met with visual proof of your position. You couldn't just verbalize. And they could come back and show me some black art. So we would get into that. The Wilbur Haynie. Now, he was a great artist. I don't know what happened to him.

MASON: Yeah, I think he went--

RIDDLE: Wilbur was bad, boy.

MASON: Yeah, he did these hard-edged kinds of things.

RIDDLE: Yeah, maybe just a blue field with a red line coming through, but a beautiful red. It wasn't just an old jive red.

MASON: Was he part of Brockman Gallery or was he off on his own?

RIDDLE: Uh, he was a little bit more off, but he came through there. And Ernest--what was Ernest's name?--he died. Ernest who did the dissertation on BAAism. It was



a classic one night.

MASON: On what?

RIDDLE: BAAism. He got up one night and he talked about BAAism which was-- See everywhere at that time in the mid-sixties, black groups like AFRI-COBRA and all these people were jumping out. But there was always the Black Artists of Baltimore, the Black Artists Association of New Orleans, the Black Artists Association of L.A. So that was BAA. It was always BAA, the Black Artists Association. So Ernest did this thing, a dissertation on BAAism, and he was putting down all the black artists associations. Because this was this: "Was there black art or was there just black artists?" I wish somebody had taped it, because that was the funniest thing.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Who was that?

RIDDLE: This guy, I can't think of his name. Ernest Herbert. He died. But he was a really good artist, an abstract artist. And so he was against black art. He just thought they were black artists and some of them did black art and he taught the whole concept of these--all over the country--black groups and he called it BAAism. He would start baying like a sheep at the end of each kind of discourse, and he would go "BAAAAism." Well, we would just-- That was a hilarious thing, boy. I still remember. I don't even remember what he said now, but it was



hilarious at the time.

CARMEN RIDDLE: What's Alonzo doing?

MASON: He works at the San Antonio Art Institute.

RIDDLE: He's in San Antonio?

MASON: Yeah, he's on the faculty. He's like dean or something of the college of fine arts.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Really?

MASON: Yeah. Or chairman, or something like that.

RIDDLE: That's where Claude Booker came from, San Antonio.

CARMEN RIDDLE: There's a lot of Mexicans there.

MASON: Um, yeah. I went around to the school. The student body seemed kind of mixed. He had one student who was Native American, another student who was Mexican, but she was, like, you know, white Mexican. And some blacks. It was really mixed.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's an art school?

MASON: Yeah. Yeah, a fine arts school.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He always did find those administrative things.

RIDDLE: Mm-hmm. I met Alonzo the first time I ever taught ceramics. I didn't know how to fire the kiln at L.A. High [School], and they said, "Well, there's a guy over there at Manual Arts [High School] who knows how." So I went over there, and that's when I met Alonzo. He





was in there cussing his students out. When I walked in the door he was calling them all kinds of names. And I thought, "God, what kind of school is this?"

CARMEN RIDDLE: Those were great days, though. His gallery had great turnouts, Brockman Gallery. Everybody came to those shows.

RIDDLE: Mm-hmm. That was the place to be.

CARMEN RIDDLE: To either see the art or to be seen. Because they had great outfits and they had-- He had music, and it was really a lot of fun. A lot of fun.

MASON: Somebody said the difference between Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32 and the Brockman Gallery was that the Brockman Gallery showed all the artists with MFA's, and Suzanne Jackson's gallery showed everybody else. Because she had like Emory Douglas. She showed-- Or is his name Douglas Emory? I always get that mixed up. But the Panther.

RIDDLE: Well, she was more like-- Because she had poetry reading and stuff, too.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She was more like an artist herself, too. I mean, she wasn't--

RIDDLE: Well-- Yeah, I understand.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Alonzo was more administrative. Alonzo did know art. He's an artist but, for the most part, he did know good art. And Suzanne was a piece of art. She



had a marriage where they drove off on a motorcycle. They had their marriage--

RIDDLE: In that same place at--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Up there in Griffith Park.

RIDDLE: Up there where all the little ferns were--

CARMEN RIDDLE: And everybody came--

RIDDLE: Had a breakfast--

CARMEN RIDDLE: And they drove off on a--

RIDDLE: And they drove off on the back of Pete's motorcycle.

CARMEN RIDDLE: A motorcycle.

RIDDLE: She was in a bridal gown and the whole thing.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I didn't know he was married at the time.

RIDDLE: And he drove off, and her gown and her thing was just flowing in the back.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She was really a character. Plus, she went with Bernie [Bernard T.]--

RIDDLE: Casey.

CARMEN RIDDLE: --Casey for a long time. And she was just really far out.

MASON: She actually had grown up in Alaska and San Francisco.

CARMEN RIDDLE: She was, I guess, the ultimate of hippiedom.

RIDDLE: And then she had, like, poetry readings and other



kinds of, like you say, Panther kinds of things. She had more--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Happenings there.

RIDDLE: You know, social, avant-garde things that mixed with art.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But see, Alonzo had a lot of the society and art and bodies.

RIDDLE: He was right over there by where all the black people live.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's where Sidney Poitier came and bought some of his art there. He had a lot of stars that came to his.

RIDDLE: And other galleries were raiding Alonzo's artists, like Ben[jamin] Horowitz and Ankrum Gallery and those people wanted-- They would come to Alonzo's and try to pick some of his artists off.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Black artists.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But Alonzo and them, they did a lot.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It was great because they brought the black artists together.

RIDDLE: And then David Hammons, he said one of the funniest things. It's so true. But one night, like Carmen said, everybody went, I mean, to be seen at Brockman Gallery.



CARMEN RIDDLE: And then you'd have outfits, special outfits just for Brockman Gallery.

RIDDLE: And I remember one time David said-- He wasn't there. And everybody said, "Where's David? Where's David? Where's David?" And everybody was in a panic because they thought he had died or something, because nobody missed an opening at Brockman's. So I rushed home and said,

"David! David, are you all right?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "Man, how come you didn't come to the art show?"

He said, "John," he said, "I knew--" He always talked funny. He said, "John, I knew that I was the only black artist in Los Angeles doing art because all the other artists were at Brockman. And it felt so good to be the only black artist in Los Angeles doing art." Because he knew that at that exact hour, none of the other black artists were doing art because they were all at Brockman's. So he stayed home and did art.

MASON: Well, I have a thing from you. You did your first one-man show at Brockman Gallery, right? In '68?

CARMEN RIDDLE: That was the beginning of Brockman Gallery.





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[This portion of the text has been sealed.]

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CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, I still think that was the beginning of the black artist group that they were in.

RIDDLE: It was.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And that's the one that's the most well-known on the whole coast, you know.

MASON: What about Art-West [Associated], though?

RIDDLE: Well, that was Fred Eversley.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That was just something that came out of that.

RIDDLE: Now, Fred Eversley was--

CARMEN RIDDLE: They wanted to have something else.

RIDDLE: You know who his brother is, is Ron Karenga.

MASON: Fred Eversley's brother is Ron Karenga?

RIDDLE: Not Fred Eversley. What's his name? Fred-- What was Ron Karenga's other name?

CARMEN RIDDLE: I don't know.

RIDDLE: See, Ruth Waddy started Art-West with this guy. The guy who was in it, he was a gay. But this was like when gay was--



CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, you mean that real tall gay one?

RIDDLE: When gay wasn't like gay is now. And he wore--

MASON: Was it William Smith?

CARMEN RIDDLE: He was effeminate.

RIDDLE: Wesley Gale. And he would come with horsetail fly swishers. I mean, he was like--

CARMEN RIDDLE: He was really outlandish.

RIDDLE: "I'm Wesley Gale." I mean, he was outlandish.

But now, Ruth's group, Ron-- What was Ron [now Maulana] Karenga's name before he was Ron Karenga? Because he used to always be at Halver Milley's, at those parties arguing. But he was a social worker. And his brother was an artist, because he was in Art-West. And I remember afterwards when I found out-- Because his brother was real, kind of like-- There was a lot of feminine men artists in Art-West, and his brother was one of them. And I remember later when Ron Karenga became Ron Karenga, I used to tease him about his brother, because Ron was out there being all militant and everything.

MASON: He's very, very macho.

RIDDLE: But he went too far, because he was torturing women.

MASON: Yeah, I heard he's been arrested.

RIDDLE: We used to go to some of his things and the people were saying, "Ron Karenga! Ron Karenga!" It was



like idolizing Ron Karenga rather than-- I mean, it actually culminated in the war with the Panthers.

MASON: Yeah, "Bunchy" Carter--

RIDDLE: In fact, two guys at UCLA, Bunchy Carter and [John] Huggins, got killed out there on campus.

MASON: Why was that? I mean, because--

RIDDLE: Because the FBI and them had infiltrated the--or whatever part of the American government--organizations.

And you know, it's like, "Man, they talking about your momma over there," with us. And then they would tell the Black Panthers, "Man, they say your momma was a dog."

"Man, what'd you say about my momma?" And then all of that black hostility spilled over in those killings, but--

MASON: Do you think their ideology was that different or not?

RIDDLE: Well, it's kind of like DuBois and Booker T.

[Washington], you know. Malcolm [X] and Martin [Luther King, Jr.]. We need it all. There's no one black

philosophy that's going to cover all the black diversity and bring everybody together. Again, like art in the

Watts riots. My first real art stuff came when I met Noah [Purifoy] and them after the riots, because we put together the first Watts [Summer] Festival [of Art].

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: The very first one.





MASON: Were you part of the 66 Signs of Neon, too?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. That's in that show with Noah when he has Sir Watts. See, that's when I met Noah. He was making that thing out of those safety pins, because he had gotten all that out of a cleaners that had burned up. But Signs of Neon was like, to me, when I first met real black artists and they were doing stuff. And we had those art festivals out there in Watts. But Alonzo had like the first black gallery.

MASON: Yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And gathering.

RIDDLE: Those were the greatest Saturday meetings when you had to bring a piece to critique. And it couldn't be no old piece; it had to be something you just worked on. You had to stick it up there in front of everybody, and everybody sat on the other wall at Brockman on the floor. And there was a couple of jugs of paisano wine, and everybody sat back and--

CARMEN RIDDLE: They drank and partied.

RIDDLE: You know, and you had to prove your point through your art.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right. And they were all such great artists, just great.

RIDDLE: And I got to really be friends with these people I had never met, like Bridge and David and John.



CARMEN RIDDLE: Did you do Outterbridge?

MASON: Yeah, Richard [Cándida] Smith--I guess you talked to him on the phone--did John Outterbridge. It was a long one.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, really?

MASON: He had a lot to talk about.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, yeah. He can talk a lot about everything.

MASON: What about all those organizations that sprang up after the Watts uprising, like the Mafundi Institute and the Watts Writers Workshop?

RIDDLE: They were good. [Budd] Schulberg did the Watts Writers Workshop. And it gave people who were in the same organized anger an outlet, who were writers. And what's the old guy? They still show him. He started founding and developing black entrepreneurship. A real old guy.

MASON: Jim Woods?

RIDDLE: It's a real old guy. He was young then, but he's real old. I see him on TV still, and he had a manufacturing-- Like the first black baseball bats that were ever made for the major league, they had a bat factory out there.

MASON: Okay. I know who you're talking about, but I can't remember what his name is.



RIDDLE: I mean, it folded. I used to go to those meetings and that's when I first heard the concept "art pimps." I mean, "poverty pimps." These guys would be in these meetings and they had like \$200 alligator shoes and fine clothes, and they would be talking about administering this federal money for the masses, and I could tell by looking at them where the money was going. They would put that money in their pockets, you know. But that's when black folks was really-- Poverty pimps, that's what they were. We used to call them the poverty pimps, and they'd get mad.

But a lot of things [were] good and a lot of things bad. Bridge went out there, for instance, to build this tribute to the Watts riots.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: They burnt that sucker up. It was supposed to be like a drum kind of tower thing that--

CARMEN RIDDLE: He worked in the Watts Towers.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But those people burned it up.

MASON: Actually, Richard wanted me to ask you about that, because--

RIDDLE: It's a vague memory, now. I just remember they built it and it burned up.

MASON: Well, who would have burned it up? Because I know



there was kind of a--

RIDDLE: People out there who didn't like it, you know.

Because they felt like--

MASON: People who didn't like the art or something?

RIDDLE: They felt like it was in a vacant lot where some stuff had burned down, as I recall. And it was like, "We need jobs and we need these things, and you're going to put this old piece of crap out here? We don't care nothing about this!"

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, you know, a lot of people think artists are elitists. They feel that art isn't-- "How's the art going to help me eat?" and all that.

RIDDLE: So I mean--

CARMEN RIDDLE: There's always been kind of a gap between art and the lower classes, because art is primarily for-- Even though the artists may be for the lower classes, or from the lower classes, the people who buy art and get to enjoy art are usually the elite, and the people who are knowledgeable about it.

RIDDLE: And people who have expendable cash to buy things that are-- Again, it goes into the abstract.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's like most people-- Say, before we got here-- It's a black city now. But before we got here, most of the people who were his patrons were white. Even though he was doing black art, the people who bought his





art were white. So it's kind of a conflict.

MASON: Well, you have some celebrities here.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Hmm?

MASON: Black celebrities, though. You had like Sidney Poitier?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, yeah. Well, he tries to think of the blacks living--

RIDDLE: Well, he bought in L.A.

CARMEN RIDDLE: There were more whites that supported him than blacks. His idea in doing art, though, was to have blacks buy his art and to have it in their homes and to have it affordable.

RIDDLE: Yeah, that was my motto.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Because most of the people who could afford it, like doctors and so forth, were not buying art.

MASON: Like Leon [O.] Banks?

RIDDLE: It was like quality art at affordable prices.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right.

RIDDLE: That was my motto. That's when I went into printmaking, because you could do multiple images and you could afford to sell a piece for \$200, because you had one hundred of them.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, and most people could afford it. And here, I mean--

RIDDLE: Whereas now you get an original, you want \$2,000,



and you can't find nobody.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He's in everybody's home here. I mean, he is just--

RIDDLE: That's why I need to get out of here. I've saturated the market. [laughter]

CARMEN RIDDLE: And plus, like Andy [Andrew J.] Young [Jr.] and them, they all have-- Andy must have about ten pieces of his in his own home. He's really just sold to everybody; [everybody] has some of his art here.

RIDDLE: And he's given me commissions, too. In fact, he gave me an Olympic [Games] commission to do a poster for the Olympics. And they were mad at first and said, "Well, you can't just do this without competition, Andy." And Shirley Franklin said, "Well, if Andy says he's going to do it, I guess it will happen that way." In fact, I was supposed to call him; I didn't call him yet.

MASON: Yeah. That brings me to a question that I wanted to ask you about, this idea of trying to communicate with the black community. Because the interview I just did, we were talking about the Studio Museum and how the director feels that the Studio Museum should be responsible to the community in which it resides and it shouldn't talk down to people and that sort of thing. But I just wonder, how do you find out where people are and what they want and what they're thinking about? I was also talking to an



independent black filmmaker who said that his films, although they deal with black life realistically-- I mean, just take, like, To Sleep with Anger, Charles Burnett. It didn't do as well as Superfly, and yet it was a film that, it seems, a lot of black people could identify with and, you know, is exquisitely done. And so, as a black artist you're trying to sort of negotiate these things. How do you--?

CARMEN RIDDLE: I don't think he does.

MASON: Oh.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Just being black and living as a black man, he just puts down what he knows.

RIDDLE: Yeah, there's always resource material that comes to you. That's what goes all the way back to the earlier comment on Bobby Seale and "Art ain't shit." I had just gone through nine years of night school, and I just never stopped. And here I was getting ready to be an artist, and here's a black person who I respected saying that what I did wasn't worth anything. And then the only way I could rationalize it was somewhere else. In the next couple of paragraphs in his book, he spoke to the issue. Unless it advances social consciousness and promotes black development and all that--then it has value. So then once I saw that rationalization, I said, "Okay, now I'm justified." But I know in another sense it's locked me



into a process I've never gotten out of, and that's the social consciousness of black people through art, where a lot of times I'd like just to give that up. But like Carmen said, there's always, every day, some resource. It could be Rodney King; it can be Somalia versus whatever that place is.

MASON: Bosnia-Herzegovina.

RIDDLE: Bosnia-Herzegovina.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's pretty good.

RIDDLE: And, you know, it's just like it can be even more like--

CARMEN RIDDLE: The Haitians.

RIDDLE: Yeah, the Haitians versus they let all the Hispanics come because they work for nothing: you don't have to pay any benefits, you don't pay Uncle Sam taxes, because this is people that don't really exist except they come to work every day.

MASON: I think they do pay taxes, though.

RIDDLE: Not on all of them. I mean, there's a lot of that Hispanic labor that doesn't exist on paper, but it exists in production. And that's profit. Every nickle they can save off a worker from salary right on through the whole wage, cost of workers, I mean-- But that's why they let them come in by the millions.

MASON: Let me turn this tape over.





RIDDLE: It's so the Hispanics can come in by the thousands.

MASON: Well, that's okay--

RIDDLE: But, I mean, that's the same way we were talking about yesterday. They shot down that plane over there in Yugoslavia with the Italian United Nations worker. Now, if Saddam Hussein had shot down or even shot at some of those inspectors, [George H.W.] Bush would be blowing Saddam Hussein up right today. But it just depends. They're not going to go over there and jump on other white people. That's why George Carlin does that whole comic routine: we only blow up black, brown, and yellow people. In my lifetime, since the Second World War, there haven't been any wars with white people. It's always been some white people giving some weapons to some brown-skinned people to kill each other. The white people are trying to do it themselves, because they started the whole problem in Somalia anyway when it was a struggle between the United States and Russia over who would control the horn of Africa.

MASON: Yeah. And then they make it seem like, "Oh, these poor Africans are too stupid to know how to take care of themselves." Even though they were the first people on earth.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I know.



MASON: You know, it's pretty ridiculous.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I know. Well, at least they're finally having to help. I guess, because they sent help to Bosnia and all that, they have to give some help to Somalia.

RIDDLE: They don't realize--and I think this is the role of the social artist whether he's black or white--that there's just enough resources on the planet to take care of the problems of the planet. Because there's very little difference between bragging about Saddam Hussein didn't have electricity, the kids didn't have milk, the people didn't have shelter, they didn't have water, they didn't have this-- There's no difference between that and Hurricane Andrew going through south Florida. It's the same fact. When Bush started [Operation] Desert Storm and they said they killed x number of Iraqis, at the same time there was a monsoon that went through some place over there in India and killed the exact same amount of people. One was man-made, one was natural. And there's just enough resources to take care of what's here without the need for implements of war and all this waste and all that.

I always tell Carmen, "Art is the prison." The criminal justice system in America is the last vestige of slavery in the black community, and how much money does the total criminal justice system make in America? I



mean, from the judges, lawyers, all legitimate people-- nothing wrong with them--the police, planners, architects, builders of the penitentiaries, the people who supply the stuff. Now, we need places to keep these prisoners, because we raise some bad-thinking people. But if there was peace tomorrow, we'd have troubled times, like we're having right now, because there's less need for war. But if there was the cessation of crime tomorrow, the insurance companies who get to sell two cars or two TVs, the brokers who get their commissions-- You think about every legitimate, honest, upstanding citizen who makes money off the fact that people do crime, if they all lost their jobs. See, we need crime. That's why crack can come in.

I saw Bush say he's going to rebuild Homestead. But when they caught [Eugene] Hasenfus in that drug arms plane, when they shot it down in Nicaragua and they let him out, and he said, "Yeah, we take arms to Nicaragua for the Contras, but we don't believe in coming back with empty planes, so we bring cocaine back from Hall's Ranch in Costa Rica." And I saw one night on TV infrared cameras showed the plane land at Homestead Air Force Base, go through a remote part of the runway. They offloaded it into some trucks that said "Ramiro's Seafood Wholesalers" or something, and the truck drove right off the base. I



mean, the American government is involved in drug smuggling. It's big business. It helps suppress black anger about what's going on in the community and in the country by turning black on black. Put all these vicious fools out there killing each other and stealing your goods and making you ashamed of black people, making you hate black people, making you not come together as a community. It's all planned. They couldn't just say, "Oh, this is just some coincidence." That's just a diabolical plan where crackers make money and we eliminate ourselves and they know it. And we're stupid enough to be involved in it. But if somebody's not doing something against it to pull people's coats, maybe art isn't strong enough.

You said Superfly. I mean, the most black folk got out of Superfly that I noticed was they were wearing cocaine spoons on chains and guys were buying those hats with hair hanging down in the back so they could look like Ron O. Neal. Now, to me, it's one of my favorite movies because it's full of symbolism from start to finish.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But black people that I talk to, a lot of them didn't see that symbolism. Maybe because I deal in symbology as an artist, from the beginning to the end, I





saw nothing but symbols. But a lot of people misinterpreted. A lot of people saw that as a sign to escalate the cocaine business on every level. To be hip, to have chains with coke spoons around your necks, and to go off and say, "What's happenin?" and be cool. I mean, they got all the wrong-- All the front people saw it as a way to have a new front game, the cocaine trade.

MASON: Yeah. Was the drug culture part of the black artists--?



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MASON: Okay. I guess, we were talking about the drug culture. And you were saying--

RIDDLE: Like I said, amongst the artists that Carmen and I have been speaking of, none of them were-- I can't say that either. As the movement of black artists grew, there were a couple of guys that I can't-- One of the guys' names almost came to my head, but--

MASON: You don't have to name any names.

RIDDLE: No, but I'm just saying, there were a couple of people who--

CARMEN RIDDLE: But I remember going to that party. You know, the Bohanon party?

RIDDLE: Mm-hmm.

MASON: Oh, Gloria Bohanon?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

RIDDLE: And George.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And her husband was a musician. He had a lot of musicians there. And I remember some of them were taking drugs, and the artists said, "Uh-oh, we'd better get out of here."

RIDDLE: Yeah, I remember one time I was looking for all of my friends and they had disappeared. That always was a



sign that you were missing something if you went to a party and all your friends disappeared. I mean, that went back to teenage times. So I went looking for them, and they were all out in the front on Gloria's wall in front of her house. There was about ten people there. And I saw Dan [Concholar], so I went and sat next to Dan. The funniest thing-- The people who were out there, they weren't--like Carmen said--artists, but they were at the party.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Musicians and Hollywood types.

RIDDLE: Yeah, and they were snorting cocaine. What they had was a dollar bill, or some kind of bill, with cocaine on it and they had another dollar bill rolled up. They were passing it down this row of people and it got to Dan. And there was a guy sitting next to me too. And it got to Dan, and I heard him say, "Here, man." And Dan said--he would always talk so cool--"No thanks, man. That's too heavy for me." And I thought that I would fall out laughing, boy. But that was basically how the artists were.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They would take a bottle of wine around.

RIDDLE: Kept some paisano's cheap wine. A half gallon.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Paisano. Just drink wine and talk. And they really didn't need drugs.

RIDDLE: They might smoke some pot, but they didn't do



heavy drugs.

Now, there was a couple of artists later that were really good artists, but they drifted in and out because they were using heroin. I just remember that we had a show at UCLA one time, and two of the guys in that show were really good artists. One of them was a pure heroin junkie. I mean, he was one of those nodding-out junkies. He was one of the people who said one time at one of the things at Brockman [Gallery] that the-- How do you phrase it? It was about the loss of human potential. The wasted human potential. It was the first time I heard it said that poetically, about how all these black people never got a chance to be what they could have been, or should have been, were just cast off as wasted potential because their skin color was wrong. I mean, those are the basic tenets of racism that you just disregard people because of what they look like.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, I thought you meant because they were taking drugs.

RIDDLE: No. But I mean, that's a phase of the waste that takes place when people don't get a chance to explore what they should really be about.

MASON: You think of people like Charlie Parker maybe who were not necessarily interested in drugs as, like, consciousness expanding. It was more of an escape, I





guess.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Plus the life they led. They had to go from town to town. In those days, those musicians were like that. They had to see different people every night. It was just a hard life.

RIDDLE: It was an acceptable part of the behavior of musicians of that era, because most of them were junkies. I mean, if you look at Miles Davis's autobiography and he talks about different bands he had with Sonny Rollins and one of the Heath brothers, all of them were junkies.

CARMEN RIDDLE: All of them were junkies.

RIDDLE: And when they took their break, that's what they did--go out and shoot up. You know, there was a lot of pressure to be a drug addict if you were playing every night live jazz in the bebop era. That was just part of it.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I think of all of the artistic things, that visual artists have this less. He's probably less of a drug addict than a writer. They say most writers have a tendency to be alcoholics because it's a very lonely thing. But for some reason, the visual artists, the ones that I've met, were not into drugs.

RIDDLE: I've known very few that were into cocaine. Not an exception was [Herman] "Kofi" Bailey, because he was a death-wish artist.



CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, he was an alcoholic for the most part.

RIDDLE: Pills and alcohol. I mean, he'd drop pills and then he'd drink.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But a genius, a pure genius at his art.

RIDDLE: When he had money, he always had a full pint of scotch and one that was almost empty, or it might have been vodka he drank.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But I think he would have been anyway. He had so many problems at Spelman [College].

MASON: I understand, though, that he taught Emory Douglas?

RIDDLE: He was at Spelman for a while.

MASON: Oh, okay.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They put him off the campus in his later days because he was harassing--

RIDDLE: Everybody.

CARMEN RIDDLE: --the girls at the place. They had to tell him not to come back to the campus, and then when he died, they gave him a eulogy.

RIDDLE: He used to come over here and drink and sit out. But at the end, he was incoherent. And when I first met him, he was incoherent. He was in Claude Booker's car that night.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But he could really-- Boy, he was a great artist.



RIDDLE: Dropped pills at ten in the morning and was drinking by ten thirty.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Great artist.

RIDDLE: I could tell he was the kind of person who was trying to kill himself for whatever reason.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But all the others--Jacob Lawrence, Charles [E.] White, Romare Bearden--I don't think of them as being abusers of any kind of intoxicants, really. Do you?

RIDDLE: A good example is Bill.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Bill?

RIDDLE: I mean, Bill Pajaud. He told me as recently as yesterday-- We were talking about those Saturday excursions we used to go on. He said, "John, if it hadn't been for those, I'd probably just be an old drunk now, because all I did was drink." And when he started doing art, he put his bottle aside and started--

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's therapy.

RIDDLE: He'd take up that therapy instead of the negative escapism. See, they've both got escapism, but one's positive.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I don't know if you've heard of Benny Andrews?

MASON: Yeah, he's a New York artist.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, no. He's a Georgia artist, but he lives in New York. They're so proud of him here because



he came from south Georgia.

RIDDLE: They had an article in the paper about him the other day.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He was a-- What do you call [a person] that works in the field?

RIDDLE: A sharecropper.

CARMEN RIDDLE: A sharecropper, yeah.

RIDDLE: He and his brother are artists.

CARMEN RIDDLE: His brother just died.

RIDDLE: His brother just died.

CARMEN RIDDLE: His brother's a writer.

RIDDLE: But I'll tell you the difference between artists here when I first moved here. These artists were so selfish, for the most part, so into themselves, that they could never form an arts association. They tried. It was the Black Artists of Atlanta, another BAAism. They tried, but it was never like with Alonzo and them. It was like other things.

MASON: What were they competing for?

RIDDLE: On the social level more than as artists.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, because, you see, it's the South.

RIDDLE: Don't share your knowledge with other artists, because they might be able to do as well as you in your field. I mean, all that. Shoot, Lev Mills was the classic. I asked him to show me how to silk-screen, and





he said, "I don't have time to show you how to silk-screen." So I went and learned it somewhere else. But if somebody had asked me and I had the knowledge, I would have said, "Yeah, come on by and the next time I screen, I'll let you sit in and you can check it out." But it wasn't that, and it wasn't like-- They lived better. They had nicer houses here and they had wall-to-wall carpet.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They didn't believe in the artistic life.

RIDDLE: They didn't drink wine and sit on the floor.

CARMEN RIDDLE: No.

RIDDLE: And they didn't talk about anything, and it was boring.

MASON: Did they have full-time jobs and then paint? Is that--?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Yeah.

MASON: I see. Were they getting exposure in galleries or anything? Or crafts? Or anything?

RIDDLE: Yeah, to an extent. I mean, they were doing as well as any--

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's just their lifestyle's completely different from the artists on the West Coast.

RIDDLE: It was more cliquish.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Because on the West Coast, you're admired for being different and being an artist. Coming so close



to Hollywood, I think, too, that has a lot to do with it. You're given respect for art. Whereas back here, they're closer to slavery, and the main thing is to get away from anything that isn't academic. I mean, what they consider academic-- Like we are here with all the black colleges, and so they want to-- The social academic life is more--

RIDDLE: They would spend \$3,000 on some outfits for an art soiree and then get to the soiree and see \$500 on the art and say, "Oh, I can't pay that much for that." But they would pay \$500 for a dress or a suit to go to the thing.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's just a different way of thinking.

RIDDLE: And plus Los Angeles is a pace-setting place. California. California sets trends. I heard somebody the other day say-- They were talking about Proposition 13 and how it's devastated California's tax base. "They need to help parts of the problem they got right now." And the guy said, "But you'd better watch out, because it started in California. And things like that, that start in California, have a tendency to cross the United States."

So I think we were beneficiaries of a much higher energy place than this. Because I came here and I had so much energy, and then we used to talk about our batteries would start running down. And you really need to go somewhere else to recharge.



CARMEN RIDDLE: And our kids, coming from California, it was good for them, because they picked up the academic part here. And I think you can always go back to California and have fun.

MASON: The lifestyle.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Have fun. But they picked up-- Like they all got scholarships and became different things, a lawyer and all that kind of stuff. So they got that part from here, and they could always return to California, although they haven't. But the California lifestyle is so laid-back. And our oldest child was a beachcomber, Tony [Anthony Thomas Riddle].

RIDDLE: With dreds.

CARMEN RIDDLE: With dreadlocks. And then when he got here, he changed and became a more responsible person. And now he runs a cable station in Minneapolis, which is-- I mean, you know, it didn't take away from his artistic part; it's just that he can make money now.

MASON: He was doing assemblages?

RIDDLE: Jewelry.

MASON: Jewelry.

RIDDLE: He's always been like-- He used to be a street merchant. He'd make jewelry and sell it. But now--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, that was in California.

RIDDLE: Now he says that that was the hardest time in his



life.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He hated it. He said, "I hated it."

RIDDLE: He said he may never make jewelry again.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He used to make us think that was what he wanted to do. But that was the California part of him, and now he's a very responsible person. He's still artistic, but he's doing something else. You know, he's a computer type of person and he's making money with it.

MASON: We were talking about being afraid of New York earlier. What did you mean by that?

CARMEN RIDDLE: We have a daughter in New York.

RIDDLE: Well, only that-- I mean, at the time it was '58, '59.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, you mean for art?

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: I had been out of the service two years, had at least two kids [Anthony Thomas Riddle and Deborah Lynn Riddle]. And New York was like a big unknown. I had never been out of California east, not really. And all of a sudden to pack up your whole family and just head for the great unknown that was New York just seemed a somewhat scary proposition. Whereas, it turned out that by '73, we did exactly that. We sold everything that we had--house, cars--gave away what we couldn't sell, packed up four daughters [Deborah Lynn, Shawn Denise, Pamela Ann, and





Spring Robin Riddle], and headed for Trinidad. The weirdest thing of all, after making that long flight down there-- We got to the airport and the airport was like a bustling airport, exciting. A half hour later we're the only people in the airport, sitting on our luggage. The place was a ghost town. It's eleven thirty at night. We didn't know that those airports are only hustle-bustle when the plane of the day comes in.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: And then people came up and said in this funny kind of language we had never heard at all--English was almost a foreign language--"Can we help you?"

CARMEN RIDDLE: They were checking us out, because they couldn't understand why we were there.

RIDDLE: [imitates an unintelligible language] And we were like, "Jesus Christ, what's happening?" Here we are these six strangers stranded in the middle of nowhere, six thousand miles, twice as far as New York from home, don't know a soul, can't understand what these people were saying.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: So we ended up doing the same. Maybe we would have been better off to go to New York with Danny [Daniel LaRue Johnson].

CARMEN RIDDLE: We stayed there a while, and then we came



here.

MASON: What did you do in Trinidad?

RIDDLE: Nothing.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We lived in this beautiful house on a hill.

RIDDLE: Overlooking--

CARMEN RIDDLE: We went to the carnival. It was in February.

RIDDLE: Right next door to the Mighty Sparrow, the favorite musician of carnival, selected each February. We always liked that.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We had a good time, and the people were real friendly, real friendly.

RIDDLE: Now, if we had been con people, we could have been rich today. Because everybody saw this family of four daughters, and we had no visible means of support, so they figured we had great wealth. We always had people inviting us to these nice cocktail parties in backyards with wealthy people and bankers. "These are the Riddles. They just got here from California." And everybody's all jumping all over you and wanting us to invest money, open accounts in banks, and we ain't got quarters. But, I mean, if we had been slick con people with a plan, we might have been able to pull something off.

MASON: Did you make any art out of that experience or



during that time?

RIDDLE: No, I just read. It turned out to be like a long vacation. I read books, and we sat on our porch all day.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We went to the carnival at night.

RIDDLE: Went to carnival at night.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It was amazing because those people danced through the streets, and you'd hear the music in all the taxis, everywhere.

RIDDLE: Uh-huh, it was great.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Everybody just dancing through. Did you ever see Black Orpheus?

MASON: No.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, gosh. You should look at that. It's a great movie. It's about the carnival in Rio.

MASON: I see.

CARMEN RIDDLE: The same thing.

RIDDLE: It was carnival and you went to "jump-ups" every night. And one night--

MASON: What is that?

RIDDLE: That's like what they call a party.

MASON: Oh.

RIDDLE: And you go and you jump up and down. And we let our kids go to the beach. We always laugh now when someone says, "Where are your daughters?" She'd say, "Oh, they went to the beach." "They went to the beach?"



Alone?" Like nobody ever went to the beach alone.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Then we started getting scared. We said, "Oh, my god!"

RIDDLE: "Our kids are gone forever!" But it was an interesting experience.

And then we came back to Miami. And those Cubans that left Castro's Cuba, they want to act more white than white people. So they were worse racists than white people.

MASON: Yeah, they were real conservative Republicans.

RIDDLE: So we stayed there about a week and we cut out. We came here because we heard this was "little New York."

CARMEN RIDDLE: Because there was a black mayor [Maynard Jackson].

RIDDLE: It wasn't little New York.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Uh-uh.

MASON: Yeah. You get the impression that Atlanta is a black city, but then you wonder how much black people really control in terms of the economics.

RIDDLE: Yeah, that's where the breakdowns come.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And what kind of black people?

RIDDLE: Political power--they control it. But in terms of economics, it's no contest. That's why at the beginning when we were talking about Billy Paine and Maynard and them-- I mean, those people just took the





Olympic's money and the Olympic's operation and said, "No. You got us the city. Now get out of the way. We're gonna run it."

CARMEN RIDDLE: They still don't got the [inaudible].

RIDDLE: They said that in the papers, too.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They did? Today?

RIDDLE: Not about the [inaudible]. But that they told the commissioner, Michael Lomax, who's an exponent of cultural arts and things here-- In fact, he's the spearhead behind the National Black Arts Festival. And they told him--

MASON: He isn't related to the Los Angeles Lomax?

RIDDLE: Same people.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

RIDDLE: They used to live right there on Cimarron [Street] and Adams [Boulevard] when I was growing up. Melanie [Lomax], and Wilhemina [Lomax], the woman who sued the [Los Angeles] Times for the job, because she was a reporter-- They had that newspaper-- What's that paper? The Sentinel?

CARMEN RIDDLE: No.

RIDDLE: The Atlanta-- The L.A. what? Wasn't that the Sentinel?

CARMEN RIDDLE: The Sentinel or the [California] Eagle. But that wasn't what they were--



RIDDLE: But she had a black newspaper.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They refused to hire her at the Times.

RIDDLE: As a reporter.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I wonder if Melanie ever became a lawyer.

RIDDLE: She got eleven years' back pay.

MASON: Wow!

RIDDLE: Plus the job.

MASON: Wow!

RIDDLE: So, yeah. Michael's one of them. There's about five kids.

MASON: I'm still not sure who controls the Olympics now. Is it a big corporation or--?

RIDDLE: White people.

MASON: Or is it a corporate interest?

RIDDLE: Well, it's called the Atlantic Committee for the Olympic Games, ACOG. It's under the control of white people. There's some black token people, but the white people make all the decisions. You know, anytime it's-- Like my father said, "Whenever there's a pile of money, Johnny, there's always gonna be some criminals around." And you're looking at the kind of money L.A. Olympics was supposed to have generated, in the billions and billions. You probably have people who just follow Olympics all around the world, and every four years they get a cut of the pie. It wouldn't be unreasonable, because there's a



lot of expertise in Atlanta now--with the Olympic Games in Los Angeles that came here directly from Barcelona. So you've got that group of people. Then you've got people who right now, like we're doing this interview, they're sitting up talking, cutting deals on their share of the pie and their middleman fee and their commission for hooking up deals and all that. So by the time the people find out two weeks before the Olympics, they'll be going around, "Where's my part?" And there ain't nothing. You can't even get a ticket then.

MASON: Yeah. And so there's no organization that will make black people more aware of what's happening?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, that's what the mayor is trying to do and everything. You know, they're trying.

RIDDLE: That's why he don't have no power. They left him outside. They told him they couldn't do nothing. They told Michael--

CARMEN RIDDLE: The city council tries. They're all in there trying. But the thing is-- What they do is, like with the city council trying, they hire the city council president's sister and wife and all that so that they're-- They say, "Okay." You know, they can be bought, too. So it's all kind of crafty. Not that bad, though. We make it sound so horrible.

RIDDLE: Well, actually, it makes me mad, because I can



see that if you're not like an aggressive hustler--

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's probably like that in any city.

RIDDLE: Like right on. You quit your other job and your full-time job is to be in these Olympics making some dough. If you don't take it as that kind of an approach, there's not anything for you. And the other people feel like, "Well, I'll just sit back here and benefit."

Suppose I was an artist who wanted to do some Olympic T-shirts or posters or-- Because it's all for this giant influx of people. Well, they're going to arrest you. They're going to run you off the streets. They're going to tell you you can't do this because you're not authorized to make money off of the Olympics. Only the "in" people can make money off the Olympics. You know, this is supposed to be the land of free entrepreneurship. You know, creating business.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, you're getting to do something in it!

RIDDLE: Yeah, but I mean that's only because I knew somebody.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I know. [laughter]

RIDDLE: What about the guy who's a better artist than me and would be much more enthusiastic than I've been to this point--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Thank goodness you knew somebody.





RIDDLE: --who don't know nobody. He don't have a chance.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It's always the way.

RIDDLE: That's not-- It doesn't make it right.

MASON: What kind of people do like you? Black people, are they interested? Does anybody do assemblage, for example? Or mostly painters? Or--?

CARMEN RIDDLE: Here?

MASON: Yeah, in Atlanta?

CARMEN RIDDLE: In Atlanta. I guess they have everybody.

RIDDLE: Well, I could tell you more painters than other things. But I think that's probably true most anywhere, that there's probably more painters than printmakers and sculptors. There's probably an equal amount of craftspeople if you add them all up together, the weavers and the potters and-- But I don't really know, because I've kind of dropped out of the art activity--I mean, like the social activities, going to shows.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He does go to shows every once in a while.

RIDDLE: Although when I go, I like them. But I don't know.

CARMEN RIDDLE: No, we get about three or four art invitations a day for different stuff, but we just never go. We never go.

RIDDLE: I haven't even been going to my own art shows lately. I go opening night because you've got to show up,



but I never go back. I go back and take it off the wall when the show is over.

MASON: You seem tired, so we can take a break here then and finish up. [tape recorder off]

MASON: Let's see. We talked a little about your paintings, and I was just wondering how-- Well, in this press release, it says you're interested in-- Let's see, "recently lectured at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] on the current phenomenon of black art as related to great social protest artists of the past." Some of the colors and the structures of the things that you use in the paintings seem-- I mean, because it kind of reminds me of Jacob Lawrence in some ways. Was that something that you were trying to look at and then build on? Did you study with Charles White or anything like that?

RIDDLE: Well, I knew Charles and I taught some of his classes at Otis [Parson Art Institute] when he was on a sabbatical for gifted black students. That was a program sponsored by Golden State [Mutual] Life Insurance [Company]. But I think it was like the critics used to say, when blacks were emerging on the American art scene in a more prominent, conflicting way. They used to always say that the black art used bold, primary colors. And I think that's just something that Jacob Lawrence plugged into along the way, just like myself or Varnette



[Honeywood] or a lot of the black artists now use bold colors.

I know AFRI-COBRA's bold colors were African designs or motifs, like triangles and repeat patterns and things. But I just think the bold color is as much a part of black as-- Well, they used to complain that why did blacks dress boldly and wear jewelry. They used to call it gaudy dress. Now you look and everybody that's hip has open collars and gaudy dress, even today where the colors that people wear on the street in their sport clothes are outlandishly colorful. There is just blatant color now in today's fashion. So I just think that it's something that's characteristic of the African artists. If you look at the modern African artists, they use a lot of bold color and primary and secondary colors without a lot of tint and hue in them. I just think it's part of the argument that we used to espouse: "Is there or is there not black art?" And I think there are certain characteristics that black artists used that do make up a black art.

MASON: I was just thinking of trying to find a painting that you have. Yeah, this one: "Untitled 1967." In the middle it's got a photograph of a family; it looks like one of these WPA [Works Progress Administration] photographs of the 1930s.



RIDDLE: Oh, I remember that piece. It wasn't really untitled. It is a part of the collection of Jackie and Al Ryan of Los Angeles. It was called The Olympic Stand, and it's the 1972 Olympic Games when-- I can't think of these two guys' names anymore that make up the border of this piece. But it was Williams and another black who were on the victory stand, but they weren't standing at attention when they played the national anthem. They were standing-- I remember it said in Life magazine, where I took these pictures--with their arms akimbo. It was the same Olympics that the Israeli wrestling team had been taken hostage by the Palestinians and the showdown at the Munich airport. They rushed the helicopter and somebody in the helicopter set off a hand grenade and everybody in the helicopter got killed. And they were very mad at the Palestinians, so they took it out on these two brothers because they didn't stand for the Olympics at attention.

They thought somehow that was some kind of a Mexico City, [John] Carlos and [Thomas "Tommie"] Smith black fist protest, which it wasn't. And they banned these guys from Olympic competition for life. And yet they didn't ban Dave Wattle, who stood on the victory stand with a baseball hat on his head and never took his hat off, or the little girl who won some swimming medals I saw on TV crying and rubbing her eyes rather than stand at attention during the





emotionalism of the ceremony. But they picked these two brothers off the relay team and banned them for life in the Olympics.

So inside the frame, I showed a repetition of these people with yokes around their necks and their hands tied behind their back coming from across the blue space that was water and ending up behind a mule and plowing and also picking cotton. And all these repetitions end up with this George [who] is sitting in front of this bench, and all the seats in front of the bench are black folk. And this line here from this man's leg becomes this tree, which was a famous lynching scene where they lynched two brothers at the same time. It's in all the lynching pictures. And people are standing around, even the little kids. It's like a very gala festivity with these two broken-neck brothers hanging out of this tree. And I was noticing that white people stand at attention for things like that, when black folks are hanging out of trees.

I also show here a brother protesting, like throwing a rock or whatever, and he was in a bull's-eye. And then the patrol of poverty and this repressed, suppressed zone of black folk with the typical L.A. "To Protect and Serve" police car-- And then [there are] these very rigid, very faded people that I always used to paint in a red, white, and blue mixture, and mix it down real pastel so you have



these cold pinks and cold blues and cold whites. They're all standing at attention looking at-- Some of them are at attention looking at these two brothers on the TV screen, and also one of them's in the chaise lounge.

So, I mean, white people don't stand up for the national anthem either. It was just a case of persecution to show protest and placate, in my opinion, at that particular time, our Jewish population, because they were the recipients of a very sad affair in Munich. And that's what that piece was. It definitely wouldn't have been untitled if I'd-- I never use the word "untitled."

MASON: Well, there are a lot of mistakes in this catalog as far as dates--

RIDDLE: Yeah, that's what I was saying. My titles precede--they always precede the work. I think up the titles before I ever even do the piece. Because I do all my pieces conceptually in my head, and then if I decide I don't want to do them, then I never do. Sometimes I get satisfaction just doing them in my head, and they never come out to be--

MASON: Yeah, conceptual art.

RIDDLE: That was a Watts riot piece right there.

MASON: The Clubs Is Trumps?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. Because it was a play on black folks playing bid whist, and the fact that blacks-- We have all



the spades. We have the ace of spades. If you've ever played whist, you know that sometimes you could have a heavy-suited hand. So in this case, clubs is trumps. We just happen to have no clubs. And a deuce of clubs can trump any spade in this particular formation of hand. I used mattress ticking from the prison mattress to show that our consciousness was asleep to our power. And the ace-- Sometimes in whist like that, the ace may turn a book, the king may turn a book, if you're lucky. I mean, there's little likelihood. The queen was like stylish women; the jacks were like men in old-fashioned clothes. The ten was party. The nine was the big ride, the front. The eight was idleness. The seven was minimum wage--even though it was honest work--minimum wage work. Six was matriarchal mother out in the streets with an umbrella carrying home the groceries and stuff when she should be as retired as some of those retirees in Florida. The five was a bad diet. And, you know, the four was chump change and the brothers grumbling over chump change. And one brother only had one leg, to show that that's how disabled we are at that level. The three was the penitentiary.

And the two was a brother with a dew rag [handkerchief] that I got out of another Life magazine one time. The snarling brother at the Watts riots-- Underneath it said "Get whitey." But it's just here's the brother



that's powerless, but he's filled with anger. And to me, going back on DuBois and Booker T. [Washington]-- See now, DuBois said the "intellectual tenth," you know, that talented tenth-- And Booker T. said, "Train the masses to vocational skill." And now if you put that brother with them, you have the perfect black scenario. You've got the angry, hostile black who's getting ready to tear off his shirt and give up his life to get whitey. The insurrectionist. So then the white people always say, "Well, what do they want? What do they want? What do you people want?"

Then, that's when DuBois centers in with the talented tenth who negotiate the wants. Then he steps aside, and Booker T. comes in and fills the positions with skilled people. And then he steps aside and the angry Mr. T-type brother jumps back out and says, "Raaaaah!" And the crowd says, "Oh, what does he want? What does he want?" And you just keep that scenario going. Because you see, segregation and exploitation are twenty-four hours. They work three shifts. And if you don't work three shifts with them, all your gains are eroded in the time that you're resting. So that's what that piece was about.

MASON: The tire floating around. [refers to the creek outside the window]

RIDDLE: The debris. As long as it doesn't stop in my part





of the creek.

MASON: Okay. And then you have the Statue of Liberty again.

RIDDLE: Well, in that particular case she represents what liberty was supposed to represent, freedom. Freedom and liberty are supposed to be, in Western thinking, the top values, the top concepts of the individual's right. So I equated [that] with the ace, which is the top card in the deck. Now, the king was education, because education is very important. So I equated important things with the highest two cards in the deck, because-- Again, they might turn. If you're not lucky, they're going to run a Boston on you.

Then I put at the end of the piece, at the bottom, because I used to play so much whist-- A lot of times black people would get bad hands and they would try to throw their hands in and say, "Misdeal, man! Reshuffle the cards!" and try to throw their hands in. So I'm saying in this piece, "We got a misdeal here, and we need to reshuffle the cards and shuffle for a better, stronger hand so that we could survive."

MASON: Yeah. So in taking things like the Statue of Liberty or the national anthem, do you feel that that's what protest art is: to take given symbols and then reinvest them with meaning?



RIDDLE: Yeah. Because there was a guy named Willy Ricks. He didn't get credit in the black power movement for saying "Black Power," but he was in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] with Stokely Carmichael. He was living down here when I moved down here. And a lot of knowledgeable people used to say, "You know, Willy, he's the one who used to say it." But Stokely Carmichael was there when the mikes were there. He was the one that fate chose, according to this scenario of history, to be the one to say "Black Power!"

But anyway, I used to talk to Willy all the time, and one time I asked Willy about SNCC. And I said, "Well, what's the role of a student in a revolution?" And he had a very clear answer. He said, "To articulate the contradiction." So therefore, he would say, you study and you learn and you get this knowledge and then you're able to articulate the contradictions between what's being put on you and how it should be. So I feel like in art you take those standard symbols, and you articulate the contradiction between what that symbol is and what it's supposed to be.

And I fell in love with the copy machine, because at that time I realized-- The same way I realized sculpturally, that you don't have to create your own shadows; the sculpture creates its own shadows by its



actual space taking. It's the same with Xerox. I found out I didn't have to draw if I didn't want to. If I saw something that I could make a Xerox copy of that was better than what I could draw, that could take me directly to the point. I would use that. So that's how collage--

Now, I felt like collage is an important part of art. I had a teacher named Frank Williams at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Los Angeles], and he was a-- A lot of people didn't like him as a teacher. Some students thought he was too loose; some thought he was too rigid. He was the kind of guy-- He was a painter, but he just liked technique. He'd give you technique, and you could do whatever you wanted. And he showed us this method with acrylics of painting matte medium on a photograph, seven or eight coats. Let them dry and, in between coats, soak it in water, turn it upside down. You could peel all the paper off the back and all the ink would stick to the medium. Where there was no ink, you would have transparency. Where there was ink you would still have the image. And so, I mean, I still do that.

I think that's the greatest thing in the world, that I can take what I call transparent films--what David Hammons and I used to call motionless film--that you could tell stories in sequence but you didn't have film, like in moviemaking. You had motionless film, because it was



static. But [it] was still frame A, B, C, D, twenty-three, and there's the picture. So I found by using this transparency-- Which I had always wanted to paint ten layers of transparency on top of each other in my art anyway. That was one of my early goals. But this helped me very well to be able to use technique to be able to create imagery.

I still feel that way, except now I'm interested in using large pieces of torn billboard, like when they scrape off billboards to put up new billboards. I go by and ask those guys, "Can I have that billboard stuff?" And they say, "Yeah, I don't know what you want it for." You bring it home and you soak it in your bathtub. And you might have six layers, and you don't know what's under there. But as the glue dissolves, if you're very careful, you can separate the layers. And you get very nice collages, kind of like what [George] Braque and them had to create, where they had parts of words and parts of textures and colors and things. That's one of the reasons I want to go bigger in painting, so that I can explore some of those torn fragments from the billboards, combined with black social consciousness ideas.





TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 5, 1992

MASON: Okay.

RIDDLE: Let me just conclude with one other thought about painting that holds true for me in most art forms. I'm an experimenter. I always want to try something new, because that's where the excitement is. I think if you hit upon something that everybody likes, and they say, "Oh, that's a perfect form" I can't just stay with it, because it becomes boring. Even though I've done it, I've got to move on. If somebody else comes along and does it and then they get credit for doing that same style, I don't care for two reasons. One, I didn't invent it. I just evolved myself from the mass ideas of art and expression that are already out there, and I'm going to go to some other place. And I know if somebody else sees something-- I remember one time I was doing something, and somebody asked me, "Well, how do you do that?" And they were another artist, and I told them. And I thought to myself afterwards, I said, "Well, if that person is willing to go through what I just went through to get this particular process, they're welcome to it." But they've got to go through-- If they want exactly what I just did, they've got to put out these same hours. So I explained it to him.



It was like a picture of Sammy Davis [Jr.] hugging [Richard M.] Nixon in Miami at the convention. And I had to do seventy-two repetitions of Sammy Davis hugging Nixon, and I had to scrape the paper off the back. But I had used paper that was very hard to get the back off of. In fact, I had to steel wool it off. I finally got my seventy-two images. And I noticed in the process that a repetition of the same image seventy-two times in black and white--it became very lace-like. It was almost like curtains, because it lost its single identity and it became a pattern of repeated identities. And it became something that I hadn't even thought of. I was really happy that that happened, but at the same time anybody else who wanted to do that would either have to do it like I did it or come up with a better, quicker way to do it. But either way, if you don't invest, you don't get the return. And I think that combined with the fact that it's boring if you do something just because people liked it. To just do it over and over because you could make some money, to me that's very boring.

MASON: Okay. Well, unless you have anything to add, like about the Black Arts Council or anything like that, we could end here. Is there anything else you wanted to add about your life in Los Angeles? Or--?

RIDDLE: No, I just wasn't-- As a teenager, I wasn't that



successful. I wish I had made my parents more proud than I did. I wish I hadn't put myself down as far as I did. I wish I had been more positive, because I could have been a lot of things that I wasn't. I guess I still have a chance to be some of the things that I wasn't through art now, but success takes hard work, discipline, and sacrifice no matter what it is. Whether you're trying to play sports or figure out your art ideas, it takes the same commitment, discipline. All the characteristics that are in success in one area are in the others. I don't think Picasso worked any harder than Michael Jordan to get to the top of what he did. They both had to give up a lot to get there. But then maybe when you get there, there's a lot that you get that others don't. I feel that way.

And that's about it, I guess, of John Riddle as an artist. I wouldn't let my kids be artists. They always say, "Can I be an artist?" And I'd say, "No, go to school and learn how to do something that you can make a living at." Because you can always do art. And that was the great argument that David [Hammons] and I had at one time. He felt that you had to sacrifice all your other functions and primarily be an artist. And I used to say, "No, you have to raise a family first, and then you can do art." And he did it the way he believed, which I have no complaints or any-- You know, I think he did the right



thing for him. I feel like I've done the right thing for me. Now, at fifty-nine, I think, "Boy, God, just-- All these kids are grown; I can retire in six years from a straight job. Give me twenty years to just do art where Monday and Tuesday just become the next day." And you get up in the morning and-- Now, success-- People think you're successful-- I might even be in this interview because somebody thought I had reached success as a black artist to some level. But, to me, success isn't fame and it's not money. Success is when you can get up in the morning-- Before you even get up, you wake up in the morning, you thank God for the day, and you say to yourself, "Shall I paint? Shall I rest? Shall I lay in the hammock and read a book? What shall I do today that would really make me have a worthwhile, fulfilling day?" And you don't have to worry about bills [that] aren't paid because you're not out there humping and working. To me, that's the ultimate in success, to be able to have that control over what you want to do each day. If I can have me a few years of that at the end of all of this, then I can say, "Hey, I've crossed over the success line."

MASON: Okay. Well, thank you very much.





TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

JUNE 26, 1993

MASON: I just wanted to ask some follow-up questions from our interview. The last time I made some notes for myself that wouldn't necessarily correspond to the order that I typed up the letter. But the same questions would be, more or less, included in the follow-up, if that's okay.

RIDDLE: Oh, I wasn't listening.

MASON: I was saying that I made some notes after-- I typed those up from my handwritten notes. And then after I listened to the tape, I made some other notes, other kind of follow-up questions that don't necessarily correspond to the order. But, yeah, it's the same thing.

RIDDLE: What are you going to deal with first? These questions? Or these names? Or--?

MASON: No, I guess I had more or less some follow-up-- Well, the name list I can just take home, because that's just for the transcriber, so they can get the correct names and stuff.

RIDDLE: I just scribbled all over your paper.

MASON: Oh, that's okay. Because I can just--

RIDDLE: But I put arrows to the scribbles.

MASON: Okay. Well, I can just retype this. It's no big thing. Yeah, mostly just some follow-up questions about



your work, because there were some things that weren't clear in the first tape. Then, you know, go to the other questions about the institutions and Black Arts Council and things like that.

RIDDLE: Okay.

MASON: Okay. One of the things I was wondering about was you mentioned your father [John Thomas Riddle, Sr.] had a degree in architecture, and sometimes he would point out some houses that he and Harold Williams worked on together.

RIDDLE: That's Paul Williams.

MASON: Paul Williams--I'm sorry--worked on together. So I was just wondering whether architecture was something that was part of discussion in your house, architectural styles or architectural history.

RIDDLE: Not so much any of that as the fact that there were architectural materials, like pencils and rulers and T-squares and triangles and drawing boards. I always saw my father hovering over the drafting table. So I think that was probably an influence that was greater than the natural discussions of architectural periods. I don't remember any of that.

MASON: Yeah. Okay. You and John Outterbridge-- Uh-oh.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hit your foot?

RIDDLE: I was moving it when I felt it coming. That's



all right.

MASON: You and John Outterbridge collaborated on a project for a doctor's office in Compton. Is that correct?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

MASON: Could you talk about that, how that came about and what you did for it?

RIDDLE: Well, it was basically just an outgrowth of John and I. We had an affinity for material and content. We both liked social commentary. We both liked making stuff out of discarded material, so we had that in common. We used to always go out on forays into secondhand stores, junkyards, anyplace where we might find material. It was almost like we were prospectors for art material. And out of that we were given a commission by a veterinarian and a-- That husband was a veterinarian, and the wife was a pediatrician. They had a real big doctor's office that they had just built, and they wanted art. So we collaborated on some murals and things. We were good friends, so it was very easy. Plus, it goes back to the African tradition too, in my mind, that artists don't work as individuals. They work in a collaborative. Whether it's building drums or carving totems or any other artifacts or stamping cloth designs, it was a group activity rather than an isolated individual activity. So



I always felt that was part of what artists should do.

It's just a Western concept of individualism that lures us away from that.

MASON: Yeah. Do they still exist--do you know--the murals?

RIDDLE: I never went back to look, because I think art is like-- Nothing is permanent in the world, so art shouldn't be considered as permanent either. It might last four hundred years, a thousand years, two thousand years, or as old as cave paintings. But, eventually, there won't be any. So I never think of it like that. I mean, if you put some murals on a wall, you know that wall isn't going to stay up forever. When the wall goes, the art goes. That's just the way it is.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: It's temporary. Long-term temporary.

CARMEN RIDDLE: You did those murals at BCN and they got painted over.

RIDDLE: That's true.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Beautiful murals.

MASON: BCN?

RIDDLE: Black Christian Nationalist Church.

MASON: Oh, yeah. You mentioned that.

RIDDLE: In reference to Albert Cleage. I spent a year of my life in there.





CARMEN RIDDLE: He was up there endangering his life, putting the most beautiful murals up there. And how long was it before they painted white over it?

RIDDLE: Actually, they lowered the ceiling.

MASON: Oh, right. Yeah.

RIDDLE: They had an old-fashioned theater ceiling. And they put in a suspended acoustical ceiling, and the ceiling was lower than the mural. They're still up there, but they're up above the ceiling.

MASON: Yeah, I think you mentioned that the other artist who worked went and got his. They were done on panels or something.

RIDDLE: He did his on four-by-eight panels. I could have done that, but I felt it was much more exotic just to prep the walls and paint on the walls like Michelangelo.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Then he got out of the church, so they didn't feel as warmly towards him.

RIDDLE: Well, the murals lasted a long time. They lasted five or six years after I left the church. But I painted a black ankh on the front of the church and it's still there. Every time I see it, I remember how terrified I was on a little one-foot-wide scaffold at about forty feet off the ground. I had to paint fast and get off of that.

MASON: What was the subject of the--?

RIDDLE: That was seventeen years ago, because our son



[Diallo Amir Riddle] will be eighteen in June and he wasn't born yet. So that was a long time ago.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He was first baby of the nation, and he was first artist of the nation. And then when we got out, those things were painted over. Our family was destroyed by it, because we saw him put his heart and soul into those murals. They were the most gorgeous murals. They had a tour of Atlanta where busloads of people came to see these murals. Then when we got out, they painted over them. And it was sad, because they'll never find any art that beautiful. It was like the Sistine Chapel, really.

RIDDLE: Well, I still feel that--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Magnificent art.

RIDDLE: I feel that art is temporary, even though it can last a long time. On the scale of the time that the planets have been here, it's temporary. So it stays as long as it can, then it's gone.

MASON: Yeah. What was the subject of the doctor's murals?

RIDDLE: You know, at this point I don't even remember. I remember that Bridge and I were having-- I was teaching ceramics at Beverly Hills [High School], so we felt that we should use available material-- I had access to the classroom on the weekends-- I remember we laid out eight by sixteen feet of clay, and we didn't know what to do



with it. So then I remember we were talking very abstractly about, "What are we going to do with all this clay?" And I said, "Well, let's just fill the--" I remember Bridge and I were talking, and we said, "Well, let's try to communicate with the ancestors." And we just said that kind of as a-- And it was really amazing, because it's kind of hazy now. But I remember there was kind of like a communication with the Caribbean. It sounds corny now. But we were talking; we were just both doing it. And then we realized after we talked about it that we had gone through the Caribbean and back across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. So that's the only thing I really remember about the project was that that was the highlight, that we had felt we had made communication with the ancestors.

MASON: Yeah, like a reverse middle passage.

RIDDLE: But as far as what the subject matter was, I don't remember.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He and Bridge loved working together, though, because they're both Pisces and they're both artists and they're just about the same age.

RIDDLE: Yeah, he's one year older than me.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They just really merged as compatible artists.

RIDDLE: And then we used to-- Like I said, the forays



with Bridge, going to look for material-- I mean, he would be looking for a totally different thing than I would. And he had places that he went habitually to look that I had never been to before; and I had been, conversely, to places he had never been. So by cross-referencing our sources-- And we'd always take-- "How much are we going to spend today?" "Twenty bucks." And we'd have these limits to make sure we just didn't overload with junk, buy up everything. So we became selective. I remember going with Bridge was a lot of fun, because the creative juice started when I would be going to his house or he would be coming to mine. Then it continued as we went to a place, talking about art and social events that were happening and then actually getting to a place. And then you have like these pre-programmed ideas in your head-- Kind of like you don't know what you're looking for, but you know if you see it. It's going to strike a bell with some piece you're working on, some piece that needs some material to fit the concept that's just in your head and hasn't even gotten out yet. It was just a very nice thing. We used to do that, and that worked right up through when Bridge opened the Communicative Arts Academy. We used to consult on that, and I was on this board. That was a lot of fun, because it was very spontaneous. We always had like a spontaneous relationship anyway. So





that's--

MASON: What about Tony Hill?

RIDDLE: Well, he died.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: I mean, as soon as I met Tony he died.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He was one of the older guys.

RIDDLE: He had a heart attack.

CARMEN RIDDLE: My mother's friends knew him because he used to do ceramics for their houses. He was more of a commercial-like artist.

MASON: Yeah. He had this big business where he sold lamps.

RIDDLE: Yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It wasn't real big. It was just a small business.

MASON: Well, but he made a lot of money, though.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, no. Not really.

RIDDLE: Well, he supported himself.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: I mean, it wasn't like--

CARMEN RIDDLE: The people that knew him would support him, you know? He was the person they would go get to make a lamp or a vase or something, because he was a social friend, too.

RIDDLE: And he had a showroom with lamps and bowls and



vessels and things.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He probably didn't make as much as he should have.

RIDDLE: But he had the techniques: casting from slip, glazes, firing techniques. But he didn't have a mass production situation, because his studio was in a wooden-frame, one-story house with a garage and some outdoor covered facilities behind his house. We had talked about--When I told him I might go to Atlanta and there was a big boomtown hotel kind of thing here-- When I got here I saw that. And, you know, we discussed about, "Man, there's no black vendors supplying these hotel rooms, hundreds of hotel rooms. They all got lamps; they all have planters in the lobby. We could probably crack into that concept, the minority joint venture." I said, "Look, we've got to have lamps. Well, you're not buying any lamps from black folks. You're not buying any prints from black folks to be on your walls. You're not letting black framers frame some of these thousands and thousands of pictures in these hundreds and hundreds of rooms. Give us 10 percent of the action," which we thought we'd get rich. Then he went to Egypt, and then somebody wrote me and told me he died. So that was just an idea that never brought any financial fruition, but it was a good idea at the time.



MASON: Yeah. Do you know some people who might have some of his lamps?

CARMEN RIDDLE: They're probably dead and gone, too. In Los Angeles--

RIDDLE: I just remember where his living room was was his showroom.

MASON: Where did he live? Did he live with Mel [Melvin] Edwards or live near Mel Edwards or something?

RIDDLE: No, Mel lived just below Vernon [Avenue West] on either Arlington [Avenue] or Van Ness [Avenue South] or one of those streets.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He lives on Washington [Boulevard] or Pico [Boulevard].

RIDDLE: Tony was on either Jefferson [Boulevard] or Exposition [Boulevard].

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, out there by Culver City.

RIDDLE: Yeah, between Crenshaw [Boulevard] and La Brea [Boulevard]. But it was either on Exposition or Jefferson. I think it was Jefferson.

CARMEN RIDDLE: It was just a little place.

RIDDLE: It was just a house, and his front room was his showroom. Mel lived in an apartment over a storefront just below whatever street it is this side, one block east, of Arlington at Vernon. He lived down there.

MASON: Okay.



RIDDLE: I think, probably, the other two black artists I liked best-- Well, no, I can't say "liked," but whose art was the most influential, I'd say were being around Noah Purifoy and David Hammons.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: And Ruth [G.] Waddy and Dan Concholar. They were like artists, but they were also like good friends. They were all very active as artists, and we always shared stuff. We always talked about art, criticized each other's work--that kind of thing. Alonzo Davis was influential, too, because he had a space that artists would come together and talk and communicate and argue.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: We'd always try to tell each other that art wasn't worth anything. I mean, it was a serious, honest evaluation. "I don't like that. You need to change that part." If you had the courage to go, it was good for you.

MASON: Yeah, yeah. Would you say there was kind of an avant-garde at some point?

RIDDLE: Amongst us?

MASON: Uh-huh.

RIDDLE: Well, I think more than an avant-garde. I saw it more as a competition. But it wasn't a cutthroat competition. It was the kind of a situation that encouraged you to do the best you could, because you knew





people that you respected as artists and you liked as friends were going to see your work. Therefore you couldn't be dillydallying. You had to push your own edges forward. If it crossed into avant-garde, so be it. But you had to push your own style of expression, because you wanted to be-- You didn't want-- I guess just because you knew all your friends were doing it.

I mean, one time David Hammons-- Everybody went to an art show, and he didn't go. And everybody said, "How come you didn't go to the art show, man? Where were you? Where were you?" And David said, "I knew all the black artists in Los Angeles were going to be at that art show. And I knew if I stayed home, I would be the only black artist in Los Angeles doing art." So I mean, it was that kind of a thing. It was humorous. I remember one time there was a big art show and I didn't go, and I tried that. And there was a definite feeling that you got knowing all your friends were at the art show chitchatting and lollygagging, and you were home pushing your experience. You was getting a jump on them. It was a funny feeling just to do that just for that.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: So we were friends and we were artists, and we liked each other and we hung out together. And that's what--



CARMEN RIDDLE: Plus, they had families.

RIDDLE: And they all had families.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They'd all hang out together. We had picnics and parties and they would do art and bring a glass of wine and then they'd have art shows. All these same people would be in the art shows and talk about the people who came to critique and talk about the people who came to buy and talk about Aurelia [Brooks] and all the different people.

RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They had so much in common, because they were-- Why? I don't know why. Because they all came from different places. But they just had a--

RIDDLE: But we all came together around the Watts riot.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah.

RIDDLE: I mean, that was like the coalescence point. Because there was like this need, but it was kind of like an intuitive need to make some expression out of the Watts riot. And that first show in Watts at--I can't even think of the name of that park--Will Rogers Park, in the gym, the first annual Watts arts festival [Summer Festival Art]-- And all of a sudden, here are all these people who had collected debris and junk. We were basically all assemblage people, transference of-- We used to call it taking discarded social artifacts--things



that had been originally created for use in this society but not intended as art--modifying them and reassembling them as symbols to depict what we were trying to say. I mean, that was Noah, that was David and, to some extent, Dan, because he was more of a painter. But definitely Noah. And all these people and a host of other people just all come together with the same ideas. Then out of that initial coming together, there were bonds made that to this day, if we got on a conference call, we'd all start laughing about. Because nobody really had bad feelings about it; it was a good time.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They had to stick together because the white critics would say it wasn't really art. They said, "It wasn't really art. They were just angry people."

RIDDLE: They always used to attack anybody who did the American eagle's claws dripping with blood. But the thing that I found about the critics, that I liked about the white critics, was that if they panned you or applauded you, it took energy. They had to use time out of their life to say your art stunk or your art was good. But if they didn't, if they were indifferent and didn't write about you, that was the worst. It didn't matter if they said you were good or bad. But if they didn't see your art, that meant something was wrong with your art. Your art didn't have the ability-- Like one guy said in



that group, "Art should be able to snatch your attention for a split second, at least." If you're at an art show, you'll have to look and say, "Wow!" Then you may discount it, but it should, at least for a split second, be able to grab your attention and hopefully pull you into it and make you deal with it.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: And so that was like a fundamental premise in all our art, that you had to have someplace in that art that was-- Color, composition, whatever-- Something had to put you into that art. And then if you drifted on out of it, that was cool. But if you didn't even see it, I mean, that was a sad state.

We used to talk about the critics. We'd get together over at somebody's house and break out the paisano, and everybody would just sit around--no art, except art that might be hanging in somebody's house--and just discuss these matters.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Betye Saar and--

RIDDLE: Lots of people. There was probably about-- I had a picture in one of those rooms.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Timmy?

RIDDLE: Uh-huh, Tim [Timothy] Washington.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Washington.

RIDDLE: We had lots of guys and lots of ladies. Suzanne





Jackson, Samella [Lewis], Ruth. I mean, there were a lot of people involved.

MASON: Do you think there would have been a difference if there had been black critics, meaning black people who had sort of an art historical background, but who maybe weren't a part of the group and who may be outside?

CARMEN RIDDLE: The black critics were-- Like Samella, she wrote books.

MASON: But she was part of the group, though.

RIDDLE: Well, but even--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Not really. She was supposed to be an author.

RIDDLE: She did art, but she was a lesser artist.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Now she does more art than she did then. Now, Ruth wasn't an artist. She started very late, very late in life.

RIDDLE: Printmaking and woodcuts and stuff. But I think the difference I saw between the black critics and the white critics was that the black critics--they approached since they were-- It was like they had a better sense of the visual language just because they were black. White critics needed subtitles sometimes, but the black critics, they spoke the language. So, to me, the black critics-- It was, "Do they have an understanding of what you're doing? Can they look at the symbols of what



you're saying and expressing and see it in the context of the black experience?" Where white people, as critics, didn't always have--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Who were the black critics then?

RIDDLE: Well, there were some. I mean, it's hard to say now.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I don't remember any.

RIDDLE: It's been so long ago, but there were some.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Just like most of the people buying the art were white.

RIDDLE: Just like there's some now.

CARMEN RIDDLE: They were white people buying art.

RIDDLE: At the very beginning, when art was real cheap.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, that's what you're talking about.

RIDDLE: No, but I mean--

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right. When they had the Watts festival, all the white people came out there and they were buying art. They were the ones who were into art, for the most part. The white galleries on La Cienega were the ones showing black art, except for Brockman Gallery.

RIDDLE: Well, that came after, though. That was probably three or four years after the Watts festival.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But that's like-- [William] Pajaud [Jr.] always



teases me about selling that picture to that lady north on Cañon. He said the white lady wanted to pay \$400 and the black lady wanted to pay \$90, because she said it reminded her of her mother--because she went out every day to do maid service in Beverly Hills.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And he was so happy that a black person wanted art that he practically gave it to her. Because to this day, most black people think that you just buy something in Rich's [Department Store].

RIDDLE: Art is a luxury.

CARMEN RIDDLE: You don't know about Rich's. But just in a store is the same as buying art. They haven't really gotten into art as much as the whites have, and that's the contradiction.

RIDDLE: But there were-- Carmen's right about that. I think there are more black people interested in art now than--

I think that there are a lot more black buyers, but they don't-- Well, it's like that article right there that we just read today about the invisible artists. I mean, that's what it's about. And they speak to the living artists and the dead artists, mostly all male artists, too, by the way. [Henry O.] Tanner, [Romare] Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and people--they're just now becoming invisible. So the artists that are up



underneath them like me, and other people-- I mean, if they're invisible, we don't exist.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: But it's improved, because there's a lot more people who buy black art. But there are a lot of black people who bought art then. I think the black art focus has changed from social commentary then to genre art now. Which is like black people now that buy art and spend money--in my opinion--for art that has non-social commentary subject matter.

MASON: You mean non-confrontational?

RIDDLE: Yeah. Now it's more like people sitting on the porch whittling, the older lady having her hair done by two generations, like grandmother, granddaughter combing hair--

MASON: African women with babies on their back.

[laughter]

RIDDLE: Quilting.

CARMEN RIDDLE: But Jacob Lawrence did that kind, too, though. It's just not as good art. I don't think they're as well-versed on art. But then, people buy what they want.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: Well, Jacob, he's still basically a social-commentary artist, and John Biggers is probably a mixture





of social commentary and excellent craftsmanship. But you look at the Paul Goodnights and the artists that right now are really making the money, the William Tollivers and the people like that. I mean, they do good art, but it's like "Nubian Queen" or "Black Woman with Lillies" you know. Something that you go home and it's peaceful and it doesn't--

CARMEN RIDDLE: Charles White.

RIDDLE: Yeah, Charles White was like-- But Charles White was a crossover, too, because you might see Charles White do Harriet Tubman like he did her big strong, as big as Arnold Schwarzenegger--

MASON: Like the one at the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company].

RIDDLE: Because of her power. Yeah. So he had like social commentary mixed in kind of like Biggers in my mind. It's clothed in a beautifully done, natural talent.

MASON: Yeah.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, that's what--

RIDDLE: And then these materials, they're hidden as subsurface things. You buy it because it's so-- You're attracted because it's so beautifully done. And then it may be later on at the secondary or third level that you realize that he has put a very social, powerful message



in on top of it. But it's kind of done subtly. I used to think that was the way to do slave ships and everything else, is to paint this magnificent ship on the high seas at full sail. But then very subtly maybe have symbols of the middle passage. If the sails were white, a slightly off white. Images of anguish that are bound in the hull of this ship that you can't see. But you buy it because you say, "What a beautiful ship." Until you get home and about two weeks later you realize it's a ship full of slaves. Whereas if you just put the slaves hanging over the side of the boat as the wretched of the earth, some people wouldn't buy it. So it's kind of an artistic deception.

CARMEN RIDDLE: When he had this show with [Manuel] Noriega, that guy said-- He had all these pieces like that.

RIDDLE: Saddam Hussein.

CARMEN RIDDLE: And the white guy said, "This guy's really a hostile person." He was looking at his art. But yet he didn't hide it like in that time. He didn't hide it in that show.

RIDDLE: It's just, basically, Noriega went to jail. There's a whole picture of all the people like Ollie [Oliver] North and them all up there lying.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Yeah, most people wouldn't buy anything



like that because they don't want to be reminded.

RIDDLE: The real deal in Central America is the United States was involved in drug peddling. And one of these things you had asked about was John Hall's ranch, and John Hall's ranch in Costa Rica was where--

MASON: No, I didn't ask about that.

RIDDLE: Oh, it's on [the list of questions]. He has a question.

MASON: He must have just mentioned it, because I don't know.

RIDDLE: But his ranch was where the American planes, after they took arms to the Contras, they loaded up with cocaine and brought it back to south Florida, to Homestead Air Force Base. They caught that guy, [Eugene] Hasenfus. I mean, they shot him down. He didn't get killed. And when they brought him out of the jungle, he said-- I mean, I was looking at the television, looking right at him when he said it, so I know I didn't make it up. He said, "Well, why should we bring back empty planes? Of course, we bring back cocaine." Then all of a sudden Hasenfus just kind of faded out and disappeared. And to this day he never went on trial; he never-- You know, I saw him on 60 Minutes about nine months ago. But, I mean, he had damaging testimony. They put it all on Noriega.



You know, it's like there's so much American collusion in the drug trade that it's pathetic. But the drug trade destroys the black community. It's a greater oppressor than any kind of military force or police force that could come in. Because it's got black people abusing drugs, so that puts them off, and black people killing for drugs, so that puts them off. Black babies and young children of the next generation [are] the victims of their parents being drug abusers and drug users, whether they're orphaned by it or whether they're born with birth defects by it. It's a way to destroy the black community. It's part of what I consider the genocide, and it's for making profit for people at the top. It keeps hatred and hostility going with people at this level where I have to survive, where my wife has to survive.

It makes me worry every time my son goes out the door to go to school or to work that somebody will hijack him for his 1984 Honda. It's dangerous out there. In the days of the Black Panther Party, you couldn't buy guns. But now, in these days of this century, when you want to buy guns to kill other black folk, you can get all the guns you want. But when it was "get whitey," you couldn't buy guns. Now you can get street sweepers, uzis, grenade launchers. Anything you want, they'll sell it to you, as long as you're killing somebody in the city.





MASON: Yeah, like--what's his name?--David Koresh had that whole arsenal down there, so god knows you can get anything. But how can art address that since it's--? I mean, you can address that in the image, but it's essentially a private image that exists in a private space, or-- Yeah, a private space, like a home or a museum.

RIDDLE: I see it as a dilemma, because if I do the art that I feel passionate about-- And I think any artist in any phase of art--visual art, performing art, literary art, any art--I think that the mixture of your creativity and your passion are probably two of the essential ingredients in the art that you produce. If I still feel strong about these social issues-- To me, if I try to paint flowers in a vase because I need the money and I know somebody might buy flowers painted nicely in a vase, that's like going to Sears [Roebuck and Company] for a second job, you know, to get money. It's not exciting; it doesn't have enthusiasm.

But if I can depict that racist traffic court I was in this last week with my son, maybe nobody will buy it, but it will defuse my hostility for the racism I saw in that man's court--just blatant racism disguised as traffic court justice. I mean, I was so mad it disorientated me. I couldn't tell left from right when I left out of there.



The next day I thought about it. It had at least subsided in my anger to a headache. By the third day, I realized the only way I could get it out of my system was to do a piece of art about this court. So in my head I've already done it. And in my notes I took, I've already done it. Now what remains is whether or not I'll do it physically. And nobody's going to buy it, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't need to be done.

MASON: Yeah. Sounds like a topic for a performance piece, something that you could sort of do spontaneously and you work through something. But I don't know if you're interested in performance.

RIDDLE: I didn't realize how much I saw, because that itself was a performance. I didn't realize just sitting there that--like I told my wife [Carmen Garrott Riddle]--the American flag was there, but the Confederate flag, the Georgia flag with the Confederate part, it was gone. It was just an empty flagpole on the other side of the judge. Yet the judge said he had been there thirty-one years at one time, and all this stuff he was saying. "I've been here thirty-one years. You can't tell me them stories. I've done heard everything." And I thought, that's like-- You know how they always say so many years BC. And I was thinking BC stood for "court before," the before court. That was when, I thought, that was before



blacks were on the Georgia state patrol; that was before blacks were in abundance in the police department here. It was before-- And I thought of all the other things before.

And then I saw that judge as a harlequin clown presiding over a circus, and the tightrope he was walking on was the Confederate flag, you know, twisted up into a rope. This friend of mine, he works in Corrections here in Atlanta--he takes prisoners to different work sites-- and he said that man is a known alcoholic. See, I didn't know that equation. Then I pictured it in my picture. He's not only a tightrope walker in this racist circus, but he's also going to be a juggler juggling some liquor bottles. And then maybe I'll get some satisfaction out of-- Whether anybody buys the piece or not, it will be my artistic diary of that day in that terrible court that was called a court. Because it was really bad.

So, to me, that's where my artistic passion still is. That's probably when I first met Noah [Purifoy] and all these people. That was my overriding passion then as the contradiction between what's supposed to be and what is. I guess you could sum it up, like my wife says: it's an injustice. It's a one-word summary. But Malcolm [X] said it, too, because he said he doesn't see democracy, he sees hypocrisy. That's what we live in, in a hypocrisy. You



see like, if my wife did art, maybe her passion would--  
She doesn't understand how the Haitians can be denied.

CARMEN RIDDLE: No, I see something worse than that.

RIDDLE: What?

CARMEN RIDDLE: When you live in a place where you go in the grocery store or anything up here, and these men hang out all day and they harass women and sell drugs in our neighborhood and everything-- And nobody does anything about it. And the kids see that. I just think it's awful that we let those men in our race and our culture live in our neighborhood like that. Why doesn't someone do something about it? I don't understand how that can be. If I could do anything, I would clean up the neighborhoods so that the kids who live in the projects wouldn't have to see all the drugs and killings and all that they have to see. Someone should be taking [care of] our kids.

MASON: Yeah. Well, I guess the problem is still overcrowded jails.

CARMEN RIDDLE: We'll build some more jails. But they just take them in and put them back out, and they're up here at the corner. They will talk to anybody, sell drugs to anybody, and no one does anything about it.

MASON: Yeah, the only effective thing I've ever heard about getting drugs out of projects is when the Black Muslims come in and stand--





RIDDLE: Uh-huh.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right.

RIDDLE: Because they get the respect and the fear.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right. And the men stand up for the neighborhood. The men get together and they won't let that go on.

MASON: Yeah. Whether they're armed or not, they just stand there.

CARMEN RIDDLE: That's right.

RIDDLE: Basically, they're unarmed. But I just read-- I just finished a book, This Side of Glory I think is the name of it. But it's David Hilliard's account of the history of the Black Panther Party. And there's a point he drew in there to the days of the Black Panther Party, the sixties and the seventies, where [there was] community anger and community action and community gathering to improve neighborhoods. In contrast to after he'd been in prison, gotten out, cleaned himself up from his drug addiction and alcohol abuse, how the young guys that were Panthers when he was coming up were now the young guys who were the dope dealers who wore the gold, had the fancy cars, had a pocket full of cash, will kill you for virtually no reason at all. They had gone from concepts of group pressure to abject individual material gratification. I mean, just anything was permissible, as



long as you had the \$200 Nikes.

MASON: This was during the [Ronald W.] Reagan years.

RIDDLE: Yeah. I mean, people don't realize that crack cocaine, which is the most addictive of all the drugs that have been out there--all that flourished under Reagan. He had drug czars. I mean, that's so much bull that "We're doing something about narcotics." Yeah, they were. They were opening it up where all the narcotics that could be got could get into this country.

And like Carmen says-- And you mentioned about more jails to me. Another piece of art that I haven't done is-- When you take real time and consideration [of the industry] of the criminal justice system in America, and you begin to plug in all the people who make legitimate, honest, respectable livings off it: judges, lawyers, bailiffs, architects, planners, manufacturers-- And not even at these high levels: administrators, social workers. All the people that are dependent upon crime for their living-- Insurance companies because they get to sell two TVs, one for the one that got stolen, and one because you're insured. The same with cars. Any material stuff that gets stolen is replaced if you've got insurance. So that's good for the manufacturers of the stolen items, because it increases the purchasing of goods and stuff.



And you consider that black men-- The statistic, last I heard, is \$32,000 a year to incarcerate somebody. One-fourth of all the black males between the age of, say, late teens to twenty-five are involved in some phase, from parole and probation to waiting trial or being incarcerated. You know, all of this. If crime disappeared tomorrow, we'd have a much greater collapse of the economy than we [have] trying to shift from the cold war to what we're in right now: closing bases, reducing army, cutting down on military spending. I mean, we're catching a hard economic shot at America just from that. But if there was no crime, all of those people that make big money who are sharing that \$32,000 of inmate times a couple of million people probably--where would that money go? That money would be gone.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Well, why don't we, as black people, help them?

RIDDLE: Because we're neurotic.

CARMEN RIDDLE: If someone comes and offers me drugs, I'm not going to take it.

RIDDLE: Well, you're not as neurotic as the average black person.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I'm not going to buy it. I'm not going to sell it. I say we're to blame.

RIDDLE: Sure, it's our fault.



CARMEN RIDDLE: We have to bring up our children so that they don't think like this and get rid of the bad people in our neighborhood. I think we have to do it, because nobody's going to care about us but us. We have to take care of our own.

RIDDLE: Well, I agree with that.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Just like people who come from other countries. They love this country. They come here and get a job washing dishes, doing anything they can, and they send their kids to college and they make it. I realize we came from slavery. That's the main thing; that's the thing that holds us down. But we've got to stop thinking like that and help our own people. Get rid of those bums up there, bring our children up right, even sacrifice having a new car or having a new house or something to take care of your children so that they can turn out to be good people.

RIDDLE: Well, I agree with that, too. But, again, it's like, to me, our neurosis is so deep as a race of people and we're so unorganized to the challenge that she just brought up-- Why do we put our own children down if they try to do well in school? I mean, you've got black kids who are closet scholars. They go home and study like the dickens, but when they get to school, they try to act like





their peers, because it's an embarrassment to be an A student. The expression is "Man, you're trying to be white!" But we condemn excellence in our own race.



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RIDDLE: I was just saying, though, that we perpetuate-- I'll give you a good example. They showed a thing on TV. This commercial ran four or five times and disappeared. They said, "If Olympic medals were given out for killing, the bronze would go to the skinheads." And they showed some skinheads, and then they had a statistic like annually they're responsible for about five hundred deaths a year. And it said, "The silver would go--" And it showed a guy in a hood or the Mafia or somebody. And they said, "They kill 10 percent more. They kill about--" One was three or four hundred, one was three or four thousand. They said, "But the gold would go--" And they showed, like, brothers standing out there with gold teeth and gold around their necks and muscles and crip and brim paraphernalia, making signs. And it showed we killed thirteen thousand. It started in Detroit. They ran that commercial. People in Detroit got mad and said it was a racist commercial and it was exploitive. But it was true! We kill more people of our own color, ourselves, than the Klan could ever kill. You'd have to see thirty brothers a day hanging from trees around the country for the Klan to match what we do in our own neighborhoods amongst



ourselves. That's just the people we kill, not the ones that are ruined for life because of drug and alcohol addiction. Or the fact that black male life expectancy in America is shorter than white women, white men, black women. And under Reagan, we actually declined down from seventy-one down into sixty-nine plus. See, I mean, that's real to me. It's like Carmen said, a lot of it is our own doing on each other and on ourselves. But Frances [Cress] Welsing said at one time on Tony Brown's Journal, years ago, "The greatest mental problem in America is black people." We're a bunch of neurotic people, and we blame other people for our problems, which gives us an excuse, in our own minds, to perpetuate the negativity in ourselves rather than to say, like you have to do when you go to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] or Drugs Anonymous-- First, you've got to admit that you've got a problem. "Something's wrong with me." And then you can begin to clean it up. But as long as you defer what's wrong with you to the white man, to an unfair society, to this and that, to all those excuses, that allows you to wallow in your own negative juices until you just boil away. And I understand all that.

The reason I got into art--into this kind of art--was because I felt that-- Somebody said, Bobby Seale or somebody said, "The importance of raising black



consciousness--" That's what the black social consciousness movement was about, black nationalism, black this, black that, black is beautiful. All of that's about raising black consciousness out of this stew of negativism. So to me, if black people-- If I can help that one iota by letting my black art be about the things that I see that are very wrong in this system, then I'll paint a picture, eventually, called "The Party." And at that party are going to be all the people, the judges, the bailiffs, the designers, planners, all those people I said that are involved in the criminal justice system. They're all going to be drinking cocktails and standing around chitchatting, and all the waiters will be in prison suits.

MASON: That would be a great one.

RIDDLE: I mean, I've already got it in my head. Maybe nobody will buy it.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He's a current event artist, because he's a news fanatic. And every day he gets ideas for different stuff. If he could do it, he'd probably do current events every single day.

RIDDLE: Uh-huh. I used to think about where do you stop on the line between editorial cartooning and fine art. Because you have to take the essence of editorial cartoon, but you have to, to me, transfer it over into color and composition and symbolism arrangement that makes it fine





art. And you try not to editorialize, but you're trying to let people know. I mean, for instance, one day we were talking about the middle passage, which is one of my favorite subjects. But people may not want it on their walls. But I think if they could go down with those vacuums-- They look for lost coins from the Spanish Armadas and all of that, and they find these treasures. If they went down with one of those vacuums and vacuumed the path from Goree Island to the Western Hemisphere, there's probably a twenty-mile-wide trail of bones that are just from all the people that jumped, fell, died, and were thrown overboard between Africa and the United States. One guy, we were talking about it one day, he said, "Yeah, I can just see those bones like cross ties on a railroad track." But there must be-- They said that the sharks followed the slave ships from Goree Island all the way to the United States, to Central America, to the Caribbean, wherever the route actually was, because there was always food because they were always throwing black folk over. And the ship would carry an average of 134 people. About 10 to 15 percent of the cargo would die.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Did you see his ship in the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company collection]?

MASON: I probably did, but that was so long ago.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, that's so great. Great. Have you



seen that collection?

MASON: Yeah, but it was when I first got out here, like in '87.

RIDDLE: I think Bill [Cosby Jr.] took that.

CARMEN RIDDLE: What?

RIDDLE: Bill said something about he had that at this house.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, really?

MASON: Yeah, there were some things he kept.

RIDDLE: He made a trade.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Oh, because that ship he did was fantastic. Don't you have any pictures of that ship?

RIDDLE: This one day a guy sold me a thousand springs, little springs about this big around, about that tall, about as big around as your thumb. And I said, "I'm going to make these into people and pack them into the bottom of this hull of a ship."

CARMEN RIDDLE: That was fantastic. How big was it?

RIDDLE: That was in my coffee-table art days. See, I said if you could sell art the size of people's coffee tables, they'll buy it.

CARMEN RIDDLE: He did some good art, really good art.

RIDDLE: So that was the middle [passage]. That's when I first started liking-- I've always been fascinated by the middle passage. Because in grammar school, they always



talked about the explorers, and they always talked about the old sailing ships and how there was always like scurvy and beriberi. And they named all these old-time, maritime diseases that came about because there wasn't adequate refrigeration on ships in those days. And people had to eat petrified meat and biscuits with weevils in them. I mean, they painted this horrible picture. They didn't have fresh water. The conditions were bad and people died. And then you think about in those same days, in those same conditions, back in the 1600s, black folk were packed in ships. And they show you those diagrams where they pack them like sardines to get the maximum amount of cargo to offset the death and the travel. And you think, "Did they die of scurvy? Did they die of beriberi?" I mean, they couldn't even come up on deck. At least the sailors got to be up on deck and breathe fresh air, and they had to breathe, you know-- And how many millions of people died, and how many millions of ideas, and how much creativity, and how much of the future of the planet is on the bottom of the ocean. Because all it was was slave cargo; it wasn't thinking people.

Then when you transfer that up into the Statue of Liberty, still thinking about those ships, and here come all these crackers--excuse me for saying that--all these Europeans. I'll be nicer about it. And "Send us your



huddled masses." Well, they had twelve million black people still sitting around, disenfranchised from the Civil War. They could have brought those people to Detroit at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and used their brains in manufacturing and design. We wouldn't have a problem right now. But instead, they went and got twelve million more white people and they brought trade unionism with them. And they didn't let blacks in the trade union. So all of a sudden now, the people who built the country can't be plumbers, can't be carpenters, can't be brick masons, can't be any of the builders that they were originally brought over here to do, and they did a good job.

That's why they showed, last night, black folk raising hell on those construction sites in Los Angeles after this most recent riot or revolution or uprising-- whatever you want to call it. They refused to let Mexicans and Orientals and white people come in and rebuild our community. They said, "If blacks don't work, nobody works." White folks are getting all upset. Well, why should they get to come in and build? Let the black folk get the money to build it up. Like one guy said, they'll have more respect for the property because they'll know they built it and they'll have better living conditions for a few years and they'll increase their





skill levels. I mean, the last time we had full employment was slavery. See, and I can't put that out of my mind to paint rosy pictures. I mean, I could, but I don't want to.

MASON: Well, you worked with kids for a while in Los Angeles and also here. How did your ideas come out in your teaching and working with children?

RIDDLE: Well, as an artist, you know-- One thing good about being an artist that I've found over the years is that you're involved in problem solving, even if it's where does red and blue and green go on a picture. I mean, it's still constantly making decisions, trying to-- If it's manipulative art, like physical pieces, what goes here? There? What comes over here? The relationship between the objects. I mean, you're dealing with that all the time. So when you're dealing with kids, they're-- Youth is hope. So youth is optimism from birth and an early understanding-- You look into little kid's eyes, little babies' eyes. They've got perfectly white--and perfectly dark pupils around that white. Big, shiny eyes. They're not full of any kind of bitterness. They represent the optimum opportunity for evolution to the highest level they can acquire. And somewhere along the way, we begin to erode that and destroy that and turn them into pessimistic people, like I may be right now. So you



can't afford to deal with that with young people. Because if they're going to get influenced by it, it will happen anyway, but it shouldn't be your fault. So you should then deal with them with enthusiasm, with hope, with--as corny as it sounds--Jesse [L.] Jackson's "You are somebody." You instill in them the confidence that they can be whatever they want to be if they'll understand that nothing that you ever achieve, that is worthwhile, comes without hard work [and] sacrifice. There's certain formulas that you have to concoct and master before you can be successful. Success, if it was easy, everybody would be successful. But everybody has the potential for success. But when you run into these hurdles, distractions, roadblocks, things that would deflect you off into a more negative state, at that point you need to be aware that it's coming and be prepared to deal with it so that you can get past that and get a little bit further in your evolution to the betterment of yourself. So you inculcate a philosophy of enthusiasm, of enjoying life, of not to be distracted.

That you get to a certain age and you go from a non-sexual person to a person who's considering having to deal with the impulses and energies of sex and love and all that--a different kind of love than hugging a [stuffed] bunny, which is love-- But the bunny doesn't even give



love back, when you think about it, because it's an inanimate object. But yet you give so much love to that little fuzzy animal when you're a kid that there's an inference that that little fuzzy animal is giving love back to you, because it's unconditional love from you. So you try to keep unconditional love intact while you're instilling other principles of confidence and things so that person can build a stronger foundation.

So in school teaching, the material you teach is just a vehicle to try to put those concrete concepts into a person. You take their guard down with a piece of clay. And while they're involved in this state of concentrating on the clay, then you can impart those more concrete ideas into them, because they're not resisting. It's like you get lost. In Zen, lost is found. So you get this person to be so involved in their art that they get lost. And then concepts of finding who they are, what they are, what they need to do, emerge out of that defenseless state when their subconscious is wide open.

MASON: Yeah. I remember Noah talking about that. And so, now, the way you explain it, I understand a lot better.

RIDDLE: We used to discuss that. I mean, we used to discuss all these things in bits and pieces. And then, when you take these bits and pieces and go back into art,



then when you get lost, some of these things that have been planted in your subconscious, which you don't see a connection between them, then some of those fall into place. And then, that way, you go a little bit further in how you see things. So that's how you keep, basically, the bitterness that you might have away from people that you're charged with the responsibility of trying to, so-called, "teach."

MASON: Yeah. Let's see. Were you involved in that--? There was a peace project for Vietnam or against Vietnam in like '66 or something like that?

RIDDLE: Not really. I mean, other than I used to do art about the war. Some of my art I enjoyed the most-- eventually it sold, too--was anti-war art. I remember [Richard M.] Nixon came out with the gradual plan called "gradual peace withdrawal." And I remember doing a picture with a completely disemboweled part of a soldier. To me, the fact that they were still killing and being killed, that was a form of gradual troop withdrawal, too. Because everybody who got killed or wounded got withdrawn. It wasn't like every month we're going to reduce the American military involvement by 10,000 men. That might be true over here, but they're also reducing it by 270 killed and wounded every month, too. So [Henry A.] Kissinger's, "Peace is at hand"-- When he made that





statement was the same speech where he made-- That was the same day, which was a Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, some irrational day, where they started the bombing of Hanoi with the B-52 bomber. I remember I found an old bomb in a surplus store one day. I dismantled it, and then I made a cast of a hand, and I cut the hand all up in pieces. So it went from "Peace is at hand" and it became Pieces of Hand with the bombs falling on a yellow hand and fragmenting it. Because there's always--like Carmen says about the news--an irony.

That's like go back to the Haitians. The Haitians can't come in. And here these people-- We prop up dictatorial governments from Papa Doc [Duvalier] right up till now. Those people live in horrible conditions. And when they go back, they beat them and stuff, you know. And yet they say, "No, you're not political refugees." And yet these people that could blow up the World Trade Center, they can come here; boatloads of Chinese can come, be falling all out of boats at night and drowning in the New York harbor; millions of Hispanics from-- Used to be just Mexicans, but now it's probably as far down as the tip of Argentina.

CARMEN RIDDLE: Boy, Los Angeles is all Hispanics.

RIDDLE: But it's economics. It's because they can hire those people; they don't pay taxes. I mean, that showed



up when Clinton was trying to make a point. They don't pay taxes; they don't pay any of that. And yet, they get these people for one-third or one-fourth of what they could get somebody else for. And again, that impacts directly on-- They say, "Blacks don't want to work for minimum wage." You know, "Blacks don't want to work for four dollars an hour." But they can get these Hispanics for one dollar an hour. They wouldn't hire a black for four dollars an hour if they could, if they could get four Hispanics. They've got all these illegal aliens; they don't try to stop them. They say, "Well, there are millions. We can't do anything about it." They could arrest the people who have these sweat factories where they work. Say, "Factory closed, you've got illegal aliens in here. Give me that house, you've cheated the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] for ten years on taxes." I mean, they've got laws, if they want you. That's what they got Marcus Garvey for. You know, they can go get Marcus Garvey, but they can't go get Julia Steinmetz, who's got five hundred people working illegally in a shoe factory.

MASON: Who was that?

RIDDLE: Anybody. I'm just making up names.

MASON: Oh, I get it.

CARMEN RIDDLE: I haven't heard that one.



RIDDLE: There's probably some guy who's got some factory full of Chinese and Mexicans. You know, I'm not being a racist on them. They're trying to make it, too. But, you know, put Eastern Airlines back in business by grabbing up these people who don't belong here. Fly them back to Mexico. Eastern wouldn't have gone out of business if they had just had the job from the government flying these illegals. Why should we pay for them to go to school? We pay for their hospitalization. We pay all the taxes while the people who get to go live and be on Robin Leach, [Lifestyles of] the Rich and Famous, are skimping. That's not right. Anyway, that's--

MASON: Yeah. Let's see. Well, did you want to say anything about the Black Arts Council?

RIDDLE: No. Looking on here, I just remembered that those were-- Basically, we discussed them when we talked about the artists getting together and talking and discussing things. I mean, any black organization, to me, that promotes black unity or culture or cooperation--friendship--is a valid black organization. Anything that has as its by-product--or its direct product--positivism is a valuable black organization. Where they run into trouble is when they start dealing with [Robert's] Rules of Order and who's got the money. "Who's collecting the money and the dues?" And then they get to fighting. But



other than that, I mean, I don't have any problem with any black organization that's trying to do something positive for our race, because we don't have enough of it. [tape recorder off]

We did a thing about the Black Arts Council. We just did what they accomplished, in a way. And then it says about the Ankrum Gallery and the Brand Library-- Yeah, there were always enough venues to exhibit. If you had art, there would be some galleries like-- In fact, I exhibited at the Heritage Gallery. That was when Bill Cosby first bought some of my art. And there was art at Brockman. There were always enough places to show--I mean, if you did art--and it's still the case now. If you do enough art, and you refuse to show just old art, there's always a place to show some art.

It's just like in that movie about the baseball field, Field of Dreams, and a guy said--they make fun of it now-- This voice kept telling this guy out in the middle of an Iowa cornfield, "Build it and they will come," which was like a faith thing, you know. And it's the same. If you do enough art even to the point where your closets are bulging with art and your storage spaces are bulging with unseen art, eventually an art venue will appear for you to have a chance to show.

MASON: I guess I was just asking that because you often





hear that black artists are excluded from the market and they are invisible as artists--well, that's not exactly the word--

RIDDLE: Well, to me it goes back to you can make up these excuses why you don't get to show and you don't get this and you don't get that and you don't get funded. You know, "I can't do art unless this art council gives me some money." Well, then your overriding desire isn't to do art. If your overriding desire is to do visual art, if you're a visual artist--to write, if you're a writer; to dance, if you're a dancer; to write and figure out manuscripts for plays, if you're a playwright--you're going to do it. And eventually somebody will say, "Wow! This is good stuff." But if you don't do it because you don't see the venue or the outlet [up] front, then what does it matter if you find a producer or a publisher or exhibit space? You don't have no art; you ain't got nothing to show anyway. So I think the more important thing is to do the art. And don't worry, just do the best creative work you can do and, eventually, it will be seen. Do it and it will be shown, like "Build it and they will come."

MASON: I guess there is also that romantic idea that, well, if black artists didn't have the market to worry about, then their art would be somehow more spontaneous



or more this-- Whereas white artists, they always had kind of a market in the back of their minds, and so their work tends to be more--

RIDDLE: Yeah. That's kind of like a generalization, because-- I like to put it in perspective. You think about the life of Van Gogh, who supposedly never sold a piece of art in his lifetime, and now his work is priceless. So the real issue is, if Van Gogh had said, "Well, I'm never going to get to sell a piece of art in my life; therefore, I'm not going to do art," there wouldn't be Van Gogh. So I think the white artists have just as hard a time as the black artists. I mean, they're white artists who-- You don't have to like the work of [Andy] Warhol or somebody who just happened to hit the right place at that right time with art. But that's no different than when World War II started: Churchill was in England, Stalin was in Russia, Roosevelt was here, Hitler was in Germany, Mussolini was in-- You know, great leaders all at one time, because the time required great leaders, because it was a tumultuous time in the world. Always, there are people who are in the right place at the right time in history that they become the acknowledged people.

There's a question in one of your things about Stokely Carmichael and Willy Ricks. And I'm always



amazed how Willy Ricks was the person who basically coined the phrase "black power," but Stokely Carmichael is the one who said it at the right place and the right time and it was picked up on the national air waves. And Stokely Carmichael became the main SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] advocate for black power. But look how many people got busted upside the head, squirted with water hoses, bitten by dogs, jailed by a status quo system, law enforcement and stuff, before Stokely, before Willy Ricks. But as the thing peaked to a zenith there at the right place, the right time, the right man saying it, he became a celebrity. Willy Ricks is still alive. But Willy Ricks said things to me that-- Like, he's the one who said the role of the student in the struggle is to learn, study, get as smart as they can, and then articulate the contradiction. And I still remember him saying that, because it made sense.

Willy Ricks is the one I first heard say-- Well, I'll tell you another one. Like one of my oldest sons [Anthony Thomas Riddle] said-- This had stuck because he had said it at the right time. Tony Riddle said, "Lifestyle begins where rhetoric ends." So you can talk about it, but when you take that action step, that becomes lifestyle. All that other stuff is rhetoric. And that's a big problem with black people, too. We



talk, "Man, the white man! The white man! The white man!" Well, if you know it's the white, why do we continue to let the white man rule? Why don't we begin some self-rule? If we know the white man is not doing things in our best interest, which is natural anyway, because everybody in America is trying to get the best they can-- So the white man's not going to say, "Well, we've got to sacrifice and give something to these black folk." Then black folk make enough money collectively to do for self. Just like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad-- A lot of people say, "Well, Elijah Muhammad, he's just an old fanatic racist clothed in Islam. He ain't talking about nothing." But at least he spoke to do for self, which is a good concept.

You know, we don't have grocery stores. But the people who sell hair products, fine cars like Cadillacs and things-- You look in the black enterprise one hundred top corporations, and you see what kind of products they do. And then you go look at Fortune 500--the few blacks that are in the Fortune 500--Johnson Publishing, hair products people, Cadillac dealerships. But they're catering goods and services to black people professionally. And there's enough black money out there to be wealthy if you give black people goods and services. But we don't support each other. "Man, I ain't giving no





money to no nigger. All they do is do you wrong." I mean, we don't like ourselves, so we don't like people who look like us. So we suffer as a race and then we blame it on the white man. We've got to blame that on ourselves. Now, I don't even know what that question was about. [laughter] You have to stop me, because I will ramble on.

I didn't know what "cultural nationalism" was. I just didn't--

MASON: Oh, what we talked about between-- I asked you if there were artists who were interested in what the [Black] Panthers were saying, because you went through the Bobby Seale book, Seize the Time, versus Ron Karenga's version of cultural nationalism. And you were saying that, you know, black people need both, they need Martin [Luther King, Jr.] and-- But I was just wondering, if you knew-- Do you know any artists who actually studied under Ron Karenga?

RIDDLE: Not under Ron. But I used to know some people who were influenced--I mean, I'm one myself--indirectly and directly from being involved in the Black Panther Party. Because that was a cultural-- It's like Emory Douglas and that paper [California Eagle]. But see, that paper at one time, it was probably the largest circulation of a black newspaper in California. It probably went to other states, too. But the Black Panther Party paper had



at one time a circulation of like three or four hundred thousand a week, and it was a major organ in their fundraising activity, too. They had people on the streets selling the party paper, and they weren't goofing the money off. I mean, the money was going to support Panther Party programs rather than "Here's a pile of money. Let's everybody rip some off."

And at one time, it was a very good organization, but its premise of militarism--the police aren't going to ever let that stand. You can have Aryan nation, you could have all these white supremacists and ultra right-wing groups that can arm themselves to the teeth, but you let some black folks start arming and all the paranoia and guilt of hundreds of years of knowing that they've done black people wrong and that black people would surely, if given the opportunity, wreak revenge on them in like manner, the way they've treated black people in America-- See, because that scares the hell out of white people.

MASON: No, but they liked that. I mean, because with the Panthers and stuff, the students were like "Oh, wow!"

RIDDLE: But it's not enough of a-- That's like a rejection of their parents and the existent culture. But like for most of them, if it comes down to assuming the life of a black person, the lifestyle of a black person, in the gun sights of the FBI [Federal Bureau of



Investigation] or the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the local authorities and clandestine operations against you and threats of jail from every way that they can get you, from tax evasion to something that you might have actually done illegal, they don't want that. It's a very, very hard, stressful lifestyle. And those underground white organizations at the time, like the Weathermen and Tom Hayden, the guy who was married to Jane Fonda, they affiliated on one level with blacks, but they had their own agenda.

I mean, it's just like, as cold as it sounds, the white woman's liberation movement. It wasn't so much about the black sisters getting some equality; the white women wanted to be higher in the corporate structure than they had been allowed to go. They wanted some of the jobs that had been reserved exclusively for white men to roll over to white women, whether it was on the police forces, whether it was in areas where only white men had done the work before. It wasn't like they said, "Well, once we break this door down, come on, black sisters, you're coming with us!" Them white women didn't care nothing about that. They didn't then, and they don't now.

MASON: It's the same with black women during slavery. Sometimes there was a split between women's suffrage and [inaudible]. It's like why should we expect white women



to be different than white men?

RIDDLE: And there's good people. I mean--like, you know, since you brought up the slavery time--those abolitionists. They were real, because they subjected themselves to harsh punishment. John Brown, I mean, he died. They say, "Well, John Brown, he was a fanatic." But what was he a fanatic about? About freedom. I heard somebody the other day on the news talking about-- Well, they were talking about these Sudanese who just got arrested in New York. And they were saying they were using terrorist tactics to try to take greater control of the country. It was D'Amato or [Alphonse] D'Amato in New York, or whatever his name is. And I was thinking, "Wait a minute." What he was saying was-- If you applied what he said to how the Americans did the Indians, there was no difference. None.

Like, yesterday, South African extremists went into the meeting with [Frederik W.] de Klerk, [Nelson R.] Mandela, and [Mangosuthu G.] Buthelezi, where they were trying to talk about transference of South Africa's government to a majority rule. These crackers came in there with their guns, with their camouflage suits, bust the windows out of the building and stormed the meeting. But yet, in Soweto, they can gun down sixty-nine or seventy-- Or like in South Sharpville or some other place. They can gun down hundreds of black people just





for being out there protesting. No guns. Nothing. Just gun them down, have a massacre. But when these crackers show up talking about how they're going to overthrow the government and they've got guns and they're breaking up government property, there's not a shot fired.

The same way in Sarajevo. The United States and France and Britain, they are not going into another country and kill white people. They'll go into Somalia and kill black people, like they went into Vietnam and killed black people. Like they'll go into Nicaragua and kill black people. Like they'll go into Panama and kill black people. But they are not going into a white conclave and kill other white people. They haven't done it since the Second World War, and they're not going to do it. And yet, they say the Muslims can't have weapons to defend themselves against the Croats and the Serbians. But it's all right for the Serbians and the Croats to have weapons to kill the Muslims.

I mean, this is going far afield, I know. But see, if you go to the ultimate injustice, Algeria-- They had an election this year. The fundamentalist Muslims in Algeria won a legitimate one-person, one-vote election. Democracy. The army invalidated the elections. America hasn't said anything, because the real thing is the rise of fundamental Islam coming out of Iran, Iraq, over there



where Muammar Qaddafi--another one of the bad guys-- All these places where fundamentalism is on the rise--Egypt, all through the Middle East--America is against it. But it's a legitimate movement. They have enough people to have an influence over how they want the part of the world they live in to be run. But we're afraid of fundamentalists. Fundamentalism is our enemy. We ain't afraid of no fundamentalism like Jerry Falwell and some of these right-wing wackos, but we're afraid of Muslim fundamentalism. So we favor Israel.

I mean, Israel is like an organ transplant. And the only reason it hasn't been rejected by the body that's the Middle East is because we've got so many life-support systems going in there to keep that transplanted organ in that part of the world that it can't be overthrown. You can't do that forever. It's like the art we talked about. It may last one hundred years [but] it's deteriorating all the time. One day the wall goes down; the art got to go with it. Them Jews cannot maintain an occupied territory through the muzzle of a gun. They can go get ten thousand Russians and say, "Now, you Jews kick some Arabs out." They are not going to be able to maintain that narrow, shaky position for another fifty years.

It's the same thing in South Africa. Crackers be talking about, "We want our own country. We want



separatism." Now, if you thought about the most logical, fair, and just solution to that, you'd say, "Okay, you've got it." Give them the same homeland territory that they put them black people on. It didn't have a damn thing out there. So yeah, "You can have Botswana; you can have this little homeland." You know, they put them black folk where there was no resources, where there was no scenery. It looked like they put them in the middle of Kansas. Those crackers want independence, the ones who want to stay there. Say [to them], "Okay. The blacks are coming to Johannesburg and run the factories, and you can have that wasteland you gave them." That's fair. It was good enough for the blacks to have their separate homeland. Let the crackers take it over and see what they can do with it. But they won't. They want the gold mines, they want the copper mines, they want the shipping ports. You can't have them! So they're going to have a bloodbath there. And let me tell you, when the blood starts flowing, we ain't going to go there and intervene until you see five, six, seven hundred white folk a day dying. They'll say, "Oh, stop! Something's got to be done." But as long as they see ten thousand black bodies a day, "Oh, we deplore the violence." But you let them crackers start getting killed, everybody is going to be wanting to run over there and intervene then. It's just the way it is.



That's why I guess I sound-- Nobody at my house talks to me because I seem too bitter. [laughter]

MASON: Yeah, we're in a state of real politics now where Ollie [Oliver] North can be called an American hero for breaking the law.

RIDDLE: Yeah, and lying.

MASON: But it's a matter of--

RIDDLE: Just flat out lying.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: He got on TV the next night on Frontline, the next night after he got acquitted, and said, "Yeah, I've got tapes," and played the tapes. I sat right there and read all the tape [of] his voice. They had like the words to go along with the tape so you could hear exactly what he said. "Yeah, Reagan knew everything. Yeah, I knew everything. Yeah, we knew everything. Yeah, we did it." Because he had been acquitted. Now he's running for senator from North Carolina or some damn place. I can't believe it, boy. But, see, the white man's threatened. He's threatened in America because the white man is, through his own sexual activity in the past, becoming extinct himself. He's not going to be a pure white man anymore. That scared the hell out of the white man. But there's nothing he can do about it, because as the world shrinks and as people become more interrelated, there's





going to be less and less pure white blood. And white men have proven with their theories of genetics that dark dominates white. You put black and white together, you don't get white paint: you get grey. So as the white man-- If you put, like, Japanese eyes, oriental eyes, you put slant and round, you don't get round as often as you get somewhere between slant and round, which is oval. So it's like the dominant genes. You take curly and straightm, you get more curly than you do straight. You may get one straight, one curly, and two mixed. So the white man's gene isn't even the dominant gene. How the hell does he expect to be the dominant species when he doesn't have a dominant gene?

MASON: By an imagination that can create an atom bomb.

RIDDLE: Well, that's that same-- That's why in Yacub, he was like a mutation in that play, the white man is a mutation. He's a genetic disease that's come to afflict the planet.

MASON: Oh, you mean that Muslim [inaudible]?

RIDDLE: Yeah, Yacub. So, I mean, it's not necessarily true. But you look at some of the ways other cultures-- so-called third-world, subcultures--view their relationship to earth. It's like the way we destroy the rain forest. I mean, I haven't done any art about that. But it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to



consider that the most exotic plants in the world, some of them are in the Amazon region of Central America, South America. And who knows if some of those plants-- If we had as many botanists down there as they have low-priced labor cutting old growth trees and clear-cutting the Amazon, who's to say that that many botanists down there couldn't have the cure to AIDS, cancer, that every major medical affliction that's bothering people on the face of the planet couldn't be, somehow, culled naturally from the flora and fauna that exists down there?



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RIDDLE: Actually, it's right next to some of the so-called West. The Russians were excluded because they were our antagonists, so they didn't get to be the West. It's the silliest thing. It's like saying the Middle East is in Africa. You look at parts of what they call the Middle East--a lot of that's Africa. But they don't want you to say Africa, because then you realize that that's part of the dark continent, the part of the continent where we come from. So by geographically calling it the Middle East, somehow it disassociates it from Africa.

MASON: I think with Russia the division was because of the church, the division between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

RIDDLE: To me, it's all convenient. It's like Western art. What is Western--? When they say Western art, they go right back and get Europe and the United States. But here's Haiti closer to the United States than Europe. They don't call Haitian art no Western art. It's Haitian art. Mexico is closer than Haiti: Columbian art. And then they named that after Columbus. Pre-Columbian. I mean, come on! But yet they don't talk about all the black people who came to Central America and Mexico



before Columbus. I mean, where did the Olmec heads come from? Out of the imagination of the indigenous people? Or were they influenced by people who came over on reed boats, like the Ra? That's why Thor Heyerdahl didn't get no glory after-- As soon as he docked that boat, I mean, he started-- He should be an American or Western civilization hero, because he proved that you could sail from the mouth of the Nile with indigenous material-- material that was local to the region--follow the currents and sail across the ocean. But they didn't--

Same with [Louis S.] Leakey. I mean, all his discoveries in Africa. He should be the most preeminent anthropologist for human remains on the planet. But he and his son [Richard E. Leakey], they don't get no real glory like they should because they show the origins of man coming from the Rift Valley in Olduvai Gorge in Tanganyika rather than in France. You know, so these things do, to me--maybe it's just personal prejudice--but they fly in the face of what Western civilization would lead you to believe. "Christ is white." I mean, come on. How could a white Christ be in the region that Christ is supposed to have come from where it was inhabited by darker-skinned people than white people? So, to me, it's all like a grand game to make you think that you're not as good or as worthy as the people who want to control the





resources of the earth.

Like people never think about England. To me, England is worse than Hitler, worse than any of them, because they tried to conquer the world. They used to brag, "The sun never sets on the British Empire." I mean, they couldn't conquer China, so they brought in drugs. Maybe that's where the pattern for control of black folk in America was drawn. Make big money and control-- That's why we got mad at Malcolm [X] when he said that time, the queen--whoever the queen was at that time--[is] the biggest drug dealer in the history of the world. But it's like they tried to conquer India. Look how long they controlled India. What right do they have to tell an Indian--there are many more people in India than there are in England--that they should be British? The reason you never hear why the First World War was fought is because there was fighting over Africa. They were kicking Germany out of Africa. They were kicking Germany out of Africa. MASON: But, I mean, in the whole history of the world, there's always been-- I mean, even if you look at West Africa and the Asante, I mean, they were a powerful kingdom and they went out and conquered other people. The Romans and Alexander the Great. I mean, maybe there were some Native American tribes who stayed at home. But most people seemed to-- I don't know. They think they're going



to run out of resources.

RIDDLE: Well, maybe man has always--like you said-- History probably documents that man has always been warlike with his neighbors, aggressive towards his neighbors and territory and stuff. But I wasn't around then; I'm around now. And I see how since the Second World War that the United States has not fought a hot war with white people. I've seen us fight the Koreans, the Vietnamese, the-- Any kind of dark people you can name, we've fought. But we don't fight white people. And, to me, I don't like it.

I think the whole war thing, military weaponry, trillions of dollars that we're in debt-- That's welfare for white people, because they've got the jobs and the technology. They make the big checks for nuclear weapons, for warheads, for missiles. I mean, you can't even use them. If you use the stuff, you destroy the world. And if you don't use it beyond the blackmail power that it had to keep Russia and America from jumping on each other--and then when China got some, they couldn't jump on China-- aside from that deterrent value, it's worthless. What do you do with a used warhead? What do you do with ten tons of deadly nerve gas? What do you do with it? You can't do nothing with it. You know, what do you do with a space station--? They say, "Well, we might find a cure for



cancer on a space station." You take \$15 billion and put it into cancer research, you'll find a cure a hell of a lot quicker.

But I saw something out here that's totally different. It's not like any of that at all. It's like fresh air. You asked the question, "Would you say more about your interest in bebop?" And I think, very briefly, that music-- I wrote on this, "Jazz provides the thinking rhythm that goes with the art." Because you don't have to-- It's an audio thing. It goes through the ears, but your hands and your mind are still free to work in conjunction with what you hear in the music. So it provides like an audio setting and a rhythmic energy. You're listening to creativity expressed a lot of times on the spot without sheet music--sometimes without rehearsal, sometimes with--but very brilliant ideas expressed audibly. And that's an inspiration that can allow you to try to express yourself visually the way the--

That's one of the things, too, that's nice, that it's usually groups of musicians working together, which goes back to, again, my romanticized view of everything of how the African artisans worked together. They followed tradition. They had a basic structure that you had to adhere to, but you followed tradition. Like maybe the bebop, for instance, was a school, and men who played



bebop worked within the parameters of that school on one level, but they're always trying to push the evolution of the school out the other side into that avant-garde period that you speak of, because that's part of the evolution. But there's a foundation, and then there's growth and experimentation away from that foundation. And I think that that's closer to--

Maybe that's why black people put together what they call black classical music, i.e., jazz. It came from the basic rhythmic instruments that black people--I hate to say--invented. But I think black rhythmic music, even if you hear it played contemporarily in different countries with those long wooden horns and the drums and the *shekere*, there's a rhythm there that's basic. It's basic all the way through Elvis Presley and anything else you want to put together.

It's different from classical music, because the interpretations of a great classical pianist playing a concerto-- They like to say, "Well, I liked his interpretation and the power he brings to the performance." But still, it's within the context of the repetition of those exact notes, you know, where they're playing over and over those same notes. You might put an emphasis here or there, but basically you're not going to just take a pen and write changes to all the chords and





notes of Chopin, you know. But with jazz, you're allowed to do that.

MASON: And you were saying with visual art, there is no classical music because you are working with--

RIDDLE: To me, there's no rules for visual art.

MASON: I mean, what you were saying about African art, how it was traditional and--

RIDDLE: Yeah, artifact. Because it wasn't really intended to be art.

MASON: Right.

RIDDLE: It was intended to be ceremonial and ritual. I remember reading once in this book about southern Africa before the Boers and the British and the Dutch and all that. And they were talking about how to build this particular ceremonial drum. It could only be taken from a tree that was a certain age, a certain kind of wood, at a certain time of year. And you had the keeper of the tradition at the top of the hierarchy, and you had the skilled person under him who would take his place when he passed on to the spiritual world. And down to the very bottom of these different levels of drum makers, you had the apprentice just learning. I got out of that particular story that the making of the drum, as closely as it could be made to how the drum had been made for centuries, was much more important than you getting off in



a corner and saying, "Hey, I've got this new idea about these drums." The Western view is to push the mainstream ever forward and ever changing, whereas artifact and tradition and spirituality was like you're supposed to try to maintain the tradition. I think jazz is like trying to constantly create at the edge, where classical is more a reinterpretation of what was. Then I see where art is more like-- I don't see any rules for art. Art is anything you want to do. In a way it has, like, traditions, and in another way, "anything goes" in art. Non-art is art.

I saw a show once where the guy didn't have anything hanging on the wall and won a prize at the Barnsdall Park. Congruent Reality. He had a title, but there wasn't nothing hanging up there. And that won a prize. So no art was art. On one level, that's as far as you-- He could only take it one step further, if he hadn't put a title up there. Even if he said Untitled it would have taken it a step further than some kind of make-believe reality.

MASON: You wouldn't have this presence there in the title.

RIDDLE: Yeah, you wouldn't even know it was art. Only the curator would know. [laughter] And then in the catalog, they could put something in the catalog, "Did you



notice that one wall was blank?" And say, "I noticed that. Why did they put--?" The art was there, but it was the ultimate of abstract expressionism--whatever. There's some word.

MASON: Dematerialization.

RIDDLE: Yeah, yeah. I knew there was some word.

Dematerialization of form. But that's--

MASON: Well, how did assemblage fit into not an African tradition specifically, but an African American? Did I ask you how you learned about African American art? Like the older artists? Was that like with Charles White?

RIDDLE: You'll probably get bits and pieces. And then I like to read, because I like research more than art.

Because research leads-- You do a lot of art conceptually after researching that I had never gotten around to actually doing in reality. You read about the different black artists. I forget the guy's name now, but he was a great landscape painter. Buchannan might be his name. But there's lots of artists, like [Henry O.] Tanner, and then there's-- And it helps as a black artist if you can relate to your own kind.

I mean, it's like the Bible never made sense till I went to BCN, Black Christian Nationalist Church. The opening premise: Jesus was black because God is black, and then all of a sudden, you had a whole new perspective



on Jesus. It makes way more sense to think that somebody who was running around on the continent of Africa was black instead of white. And when you read in The Bible as History at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Long Beach] that on the shore of-- I guess it might be lake--wherever Uganda is--it's probably Lake Tanganyika. That's where, biblically, they think the Garden of Eden would have been if there had been a Garden of Eden. It's one of the places they offered Israel when they were making an offer to Palestine. I think it was around '48. But the fact that it could have been in Africa, the Garden of Eden, I mean, that's not in New York City. That's some dark-skinned people there. So maybe Adam and Eve were black. You don't know. When you think about it, there's more dark-skinned people on the planet than white people. Why would God, if he made people in his image, pick the race that had the least amount of people and say, "This is what I look like." It's an interpretation. So when I heard that Jesus was black and God was black-- I used to go to church and they started pointing out that he had "hair of wool and feet of bronze."

You don't hear anything in history about the Moors. Then you read, one time, how they conquered Spain and you read about Moorish art and Moorish architecture. They brought the arch to European architecture and stuff. And





then you see that as, "Well, here's some black architects who changed the face of European art and changed the complexion of the people. And then somehow, at some point, that feeds back into Romare [Bearden] and Jake [Jacob Lawrence]. And you find there's so many things that you're interested in about black people that all go [to] help you to have an African American experience as an artist. So, to me, everything that's happened in the history of black people is part of the material of African American artists.

Then you see other people who are practitioners as African American artists. I remember like Romare--the first time I really saw Romare's work. He had a show in Pasadena and it took up a whole wall. It was a street scene, like tenements and everything, but he had sound with it-- Sirens, sounds that he had probably recorded in a New York street scene, people talking and everything. And all of a sudden you got this extra-dimensional concept. Instead of just some color and some images, all of a sudden you're-- I guess, if you'd had smells, you'd have almost been there. You know, instead of Pasadena, you could have been in Harlem. They just influence you because they're one of you, and they do what you like to do. So you begin to build these bridges of identification between yourself, their styles, and your [art]. You know,



it's a natural thing.

But I started off with Van Gogh and Rembrandt. And I still like them, too, because as artists, they say a lot of stuff I like. But as subject matter, I have to take-- Like yesterday, I was thinking about Huey [P.] Newton. I never saw a piece about Huey. Huey Newton, a little boy, with certain things about him, up to [the time that he was at] the head of the Black Panther Party. Huey Newton in prison. Huey Newton, drug addict. Huey Newton, dead. And I thought it would be nice to do a piece, a drawing of Huey, in about five or six faces, where it starts out very vague and faint, and it gets sharper and focuses as you go to the middle of the piece. Then, at the zenith of his influence, that's the sharpest contrast, and then he starts fading out. And at the end, he's gone. I mean, in a way, that's like all the people who have influence. They flash across the screen of experience and they fade on out, you know. If they're a strong enough influence to attract your attention, then you're like, "Wow!" You may only get him right there, "Wow!" You might have known him from the beginning; you might have gave up on him somewhere and never saw him fade. But still, it's like-- And I thought that would be a nice piece to do. And then I said, "Well, should I do it on--?" You could do it easiest on a silk screen. Or a Xerox machine is even



easier than that. Just take the same picture and start off with light and build to dark, and then fade back to light, you know. But that's all symbols. I mean, we got a symbol; you don't have to-- I mean, that's a lazy way to do art. But if you can accumulate certain symbols, why belabor the point and say, "I've got to draw it." But some people feel that way.

MASON: There's this whole postmodern movement now that says that symbols are all-- Some societies are so multicultural that you can't assume that, you know, symbols have the same meaning for everybody. So that's some of the crisis in art and architecture. The Roman capital for a European isn't the same thing for a--

RIDDLE: I guess to some people you'd present an image of the Roman Colosseum and some of those partly deteriorated pillars, and they wouldn't even know where that was. Yet, to me, the strong part about those pillars is they represent, in the state that they exist now--which is not like in their highest state of grandeur--that everything is in a state of flux, where there's the coming and the going of things.

I heard a guy the other day who said, "Well, you know what destroyed Rome was the homosexuality."

And I was like, "No, man. Come on."

"They had way more homosexuality there than they have



in the United States now."

But that's not what destroyed Rome, [the] homosexuality. Rome, just like all other things, it has its day, and their day comes, and their day goes. Nobody, no country, no person gets to stay on top forever.

That's what's hard for America to deal with right now, that we emerged as the preeminent power after World War II, we had that power for thirty-five strong years, forty years if you stretch it-- I remember when [James E.] Carter said in '70-- What was it? It was around '74, right after the energy crisis. That was during the energy crisis: me and Bridge [John Outterbridge] used to talk about that. "How can there be an energy crisis? Does it mean that your energy is at a low ebb and you can't do nothing?" You know, we used to fall out about "energy crisis." I even did a piece called Energy Crisis. It was so ridiculous, you know.

But he showed at that time what Angela Davis said ten years before; they both said the same thing. Angela was complaining about the person in between the person who did the work and the person who put the goods on the shelf to be sold. There was a person who neither produced the goods or sold the goods, who made a percentage of the money off the goods. And why did that person need to be in there, that middle person? And Carter was saying the





same thing when he said that there's a crisis of spirit. It's not a crisis of energy. It was the same time when America ceased to be a "manufacturer" of goods and began its still-existing quest for "consumer." We became consumers instead of producers. We let other people take over the basic manufacture, and we began to be the people who bought the finished goods. Whereas after the Second World War, we were the manufacturer.

Everybody wanted American. "Made in America" meant something. But the Japanese, hey, you know, they got to retool all their factories after the end of the war with [Douglas] MacArthur's version of the Marshall Plan for Europe. Europe's got to retool because everything was destroyed. They were non-militaristic, so they began to make consumer goods for a country that was more and more moving towards idleness, leisure, and materialism. They provided that. The Japanese didn't have to defend themselves, "We're going to defend you." Europe didn't have to defend itself, "We're going to defend you." And then we look up and see Germany and Japan making all the money and we wonder why. Well, we gave them our permission by our advocacy of "We're going to spend our money on this one-time thing, this bomb."

I mean, a '41 Chevy is a classic car that Reggie Jackson might pay \$30,000 to fix up and put in his garage.



What are you going to do with a 1941 bomb you find in a pineapple field in Hawaii that didn't explode? You've got to call out the bomb team to keep it from killing somebody. It has no resale value. But there might be twenty owners of that '41 Chevy. There might be \$10,000 worth of new parts that have been sold to keep it running. You see, it's got value on into infinity. The bomb [has] got value one time. People made some money when they manufactured it. If the bomb is used, it's going to do its job and kill somebody, and then the bomb is gone. The bomb is used up. See, there's no resale value on weapons except to kill. So it's crazy to me. Why can't gun barrels be irrigation pipe? It's the same technology to make a round gun barrel; you can make a pipe to bring some water to some arid land, produce some crops.

The same with the fertilizer industry. Rather than encourage composting materials and using natural materials and potash and everything to replenish the soil, they've got everybody on the chemical kick. Drove all the small farmers out of business, ended up ruining the land. I mean, it's-- But they got money. DOW [Chemical Company] and them made big money on the short-term. [Ronald W.] Reagan and his last big rip-off-- We let everybody mortgage the equity in this country. Nothing but robbers stealing with both hands. And then, now they say, "Wow,



it sure is a big mess here!" But his friends got rich.

MASON: Yeah.

RIDDLE: It's so ridiculous. Talking about all that savings and loan money is lost. If it was lost, I could go out there and pick me up twenty dollars off my grass. Billions and billions lost? I mean, that means money just laying around there waiting for the wind to blow it. You know? Shoot, nobody would have to even go to work for two years, just harvest all that dough that's stuck in your bushes. Talking about lost. It ain't lost. They took that money right out of this country and put it over in an Asian basin and produced cheaper goods and bought back the stuff that went into default at ten cents on the dollar. Cause a default and then buy it back. It's ridiculous. And then we're sitting up here, people going for it. That's why if I could do art, that's what my art would be about.

If I could do art that a million people saw every day, that's what it would be about: Don't let these crooks get away with it. I've got a piece of art now that's in my head that shows the drug pyramid. And it's made out of nine bags. If you make nine triangles and put them in order, they come out to make a perfect big triangle. Like one triangle, two, three, and four. I guess, that's ten. But anyway, I was going to have like a



silk drawstring bag at the top, because those are the people who don't see the drugs, don't use the drugs necessarily, but they provide the economics and the financing for the drug trade to exist. The second with the two triangles is like the people directly under them: the gangster elements, the corrupt elements, the pay-off elements to keep that insulated from them. And then as you go down, you've got like the transportation and all that. But it's a whole sequence of how the retailer gets the drugs at the bottom-- But the drug bags at the bottom, they've got to be made out of burlap, something rough, something textural and unpleasant to the touch. And who are the retailers? That's where we are. We're down at the bottom thinking we're making money, thinking we're big time. But we don't own any of the manufacture, transportation, any of the means of production. We're just different levels of consumers. Some consumers thinking that they're big-time wholesalers, but they're just at the bottom of the thing. I saw this piece in nine segments. I've been studying it. Every time I hear something or think something, I write it down in this notebook that's got all these things about this piece. I might do it someday.

MASON: I mean, there are people like Noam Chomsky, an MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] professor, who has





a movie out. Do you know of him? Well, he's a professor of linguistics at MIT, and he does a lot of stuff on exposing the American government's role in the overthrow of this government or that government in Central America.

RIDDLE: I love that stuff.

MASON: Yeah, and he's a respected professor at one of the best schools in the country. He's got a film out now called Manufacturing Consent: [Noam Chomsky and the Media], and he goes around the country lecturing. Still, he's just one person, but he is somebody who is visible and respected. And yet, that doesn't seem to be helping to change the way people think because, I guess-- Why would you think that?

RIDDLE: You can't change everybody. One reason, I think, is-- I used to think of it from a black perspective. If you take a strong black movement like the civil rights movement, you work and you sacrifice and people die for principle. They advance the cause of their principle by the energy that they apply. But the forces of resistance-- I used to always think of it as three shifts, three eight-hour shifts like in a factory. The shifts never end. Now, you may get tired after seventy-two days, or no days off, working your butt off, and on that seventy-third day say, "I've got to have me a rest," and you just stop. But these three shifts never stop.



One time I saw it in a biology class at school. They were showing the different struggles on the non-human level, but they were applicable lessons. It showed the starfish, and why the starfish is such a deadly adversary in the clam and shellfish areas down on the bottom of the ocean. It showed the clam is like this two-sided shell that has a very powerful muscle that runs along its back that allows the shell to open and close. A very strong muscle. It showed when the starfish, who eats the shellfish--that's what they eat, this particular kind of starfish anyway--showed how he opened the shell-- Because he had like six legs. They always had four or five legs exerting this suction cup that was on the bottom of their legs, pressing it to pull this shell open. Now, the shell could resist. But the advantage the starfish had, he always had two legs resting in rotation, so he never gave up a four-legged pressure on the shell. And then pretty soon the mussel got tired because it couldn't rest. It had to just stay closed like this, and there was always something pulling, trying to open it. So since the pressure to open it was relentless, superior to the energy and the strength of the mussel, eventually, the mussel got tired and it relaxed. The starfish opened it up, stuck his beak down in there, and ate the shellfish. And that's why they were showing how they were trying to eradicate,



through chemicals, some kind of thing they could put down on the floor of the ocean that would kill the starfish or reduce their population, but not harm the shellfish, and its ingestion by people later wouldn't cause the people to get sick. So they had this problem trying to, you know, adjust nature to man's need, which wasn't that bad a thing.

But it just showed how relentless pressure can be stronger than the will to change things. And so it grabs-- To me, it answers your question that if Professor Chomsky can go around and he can influence through limited media his ideas being made available to people-- He has a harder time than Robert Dole getting on TV every day, Michaels getting on TV every day. "This is the biggest tax and spend-- Tax and spend. Tax and spend." I mean, you hear "tax and spend" so much that you associate that with the Democratic Party. But yet, you never hear the biggest deficit maker in the history of the world, Ronald Reagan, being described as a "borrow and spend." And that's what he did. I mean, it's like he had a giant credit card, and he just went around and abused the credit card. Everything on credit. They borrowed and spent, borrowed and spent, borrowed and spent into the greatest accumulation of debt in the history of the world. But you never hear "borrow and spend." That's what they did. But



you always hear "tax and spend, tax and spend, tax and spend."

So Chomsky is going around saying, "But look over here. Look what's happening here." Now, a few people will turn their heads, and they may be influenced and they may change. But the vast majority in that bell-shaped curve-- He's got this [group] to the left; 10 percent are already for him. Now he's encroaching slightly into the 20 percent that is the next 10, pulling some people over. But the mass of people, they see Dole, they see Reagan--

I mean, Reagan, he was a wind-up toy. He was so bad that they had to change his exit from exiting and going out to the side after news conferences to-- They put the thing, the podium, right in front of this long hall so that when he got through, he just turned his back on the press and went down this hall and disappeared, because he made too many stupid remarks when he was going off the side. And the press said, "Mr. Reagan, Mr. Reagan, Mr. Reagan," and he'd say dumb stuff and they'd have to clean it up. So they made it so all he had to do was no personal ad lib, off-the-record comments with the press. You turn around and you go down that hall. And then, at the end, if you remember Reagan, you'd always see Reagan, "Well, I guess that's it." He'd turn around and walk down that hall, and that was it. See, because he made too many





mistakes when he was just Reagan being Reagan, because he's a dummy.

MASON: I remember when he was governor.

RIDDLE: Yeah. I mean, when [Edmund G.] "Pat" Brown ran-- I'll never forget my sister. I kid her to this day. Now, she's radical; I'm a conservative next to her. When Reagan ran against Brown, she said, "Ronald Reagan. Pat Brown. Who cares? They're all the same." After Ronald Reagan had been in a year, she said, "Damn, Ronald Reagan is terrible." I mean, this man did-- He said, "We don't have money to keep the marginally and the people worse than marginal who are mentally retarded and have mental problems in the institution." He put the walking crazies on the street. If you go back, that's the beginning of the massive period of homelessness that we have right now. Not that everybody-- I mean, it became economics later. But the first real rush of new homeless was when Ronald Reagan dumped the insane asylums. When he did that-- I remember when he did that. He said, "Well, we can't afford this."

I mean, they had Kent State. But nobody remembers that Ronald Reagan called out the troops at [University of California] Santa Barbara, and two students got killed. And the thing that made it look bad was just before he called out the sheriffs and those people in Santa Barbara,



he had made the statement, "Well, let them bite the bullet." Now, he didn't say go out and shoot nobody. But a couple of people didn't bite bullets, but they caught bullets and died.

MASON: At the University of Santa Barbara.

RIDDLE: Yeah. It's up there.

MASON: That's hard to believe.

RIDDLE: Well, I'd say it was right around the time of Kent State that two people got killed by the sheriffs for anti-war demonstrations up in Santa Barbara. I don't remember the exact date now, but I remember when it happened. But it's just-- But yet, he's considered--like you said, Ollie North-- Well, he's the one who said Ollie North was an American hero. And look at [William J.] Casey! You think of the Ronald Reagan movie where he's the Gipper, and he says, "Win one for the Gipper," and he's laying up there at Notre Dame, dying. And you think about Casey. Here, the day Casey was supposed to testify and all that stuff, his brain tumor--he had to go to the hospital. He never got out of the hospital. I know Ronald Reagan told Casey, he said, "Casey, if you take this hit for me and go on and die and let all the secrets be dumped in your grave, we'll take care of your family." It was too convenient.

MASON: The Corleones.



RIDDLE: Yeah. It's too convenient for Casey to just do it. And when they got to those hearings on Contras for arms, every trail led to Casey's grave. And there's no way, once it went into Casey's grave, for it to come out the other side and affect anybody. Everybody's all, "Well, Casey did it. Casey did it." Aw, shoot. Come on. Oh, well.

MASON: The tape is going to end in a couple of minutes, so--

RIDDLE: I didn't get these other questions.

MASON: Well, actually you talked about most of them.

RIDDLE: I don't know. One thing, though, as it ends, I have to make a confession about me and art. When I first wanted to do art--I probably mentioned this before--I found out if I did art, I could get to talk about art. Kind of like you said the guy from MIT has another life, but he also likes to go lecture. I can remember the night that it happened, but I don't remember where. But the first time they turned out the lights and there was an audience and they put some slides of my art up on the wall-- And I had written a script about each piece. I realized that you had a darkened room, which meant the focus was on your work, and you could write a voice-over that was partly about your art as it appeared up there, but that the symbols-- You could run your political and



social philosophy on a captive audience. That's when I knew I really wanted to do art, so I could get some people in a room where they couldn't get out and I could run my theories-- So that's what I like the best. And I think that you can influence more people in multimedia, visual and audio. So that's really why I like to do art. That's probably why I can't change and do nice little pictures.

That's why I always kept a job. I mean, I've had a job longer than I've done art, because at least I had money coming in for the support of my own family, which was six kids and a wife [Carmen Garrott Riddle] of forty years. And if you really want to do art, there's enough time to do art. Me and David Hammons used to argue about-- Three hours a day during the week, that was fifteen hours a week, and then do ten on the weekends, Saturday, and ten on the weekend, Sunday: you were an artist thirty-five hours a week. And a lot of artists I knew in L.A. weren't doing art thirty-five hours a week that didn't have jobs. And I had that formula for a long time that-- And I think when you finally get caught up in your art, where your art begins to develop a momentum and you transcend the material with your thoughts-- You're not thinking of the material. It's like a direct relationship between your expression and your thought process without worrying about the materials. So the technology is gone, and it's just a





straight link to your expression. I think, at that point, you can do all the art you can do till you're exhausted, and you can go to work the next day, whether it's in the classroom or some mundane job or some job you enjoy, by the fact that you progressed in your own evolution of thought and idea. You've done something positive just before you went to bed so you could get up and go to the workplace. Nothing at the workplace can make you feel really bad, because you've got something to look forward to beyond the workplace. So I think that that's how I've survived. I get to retire in five years. Maybe if I have health for ten or fifteen years after I retire, I can devote full time to art without having the restraints of a large family on me and see what happens. I'm kind of looking forward to it.

MASON: Okay. Well, thanks a lot.

RIDDLE: And I'd like to thank all the people I met in my artistic life and in my life who've influenced me.

They're too numerous to mention, but I love them all.

Because we had a symbiotic relationship. And that's it.

MASON: Okay. Thank you.



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